



# JEEVADHARA

## PRIESTLY MINISTRY CULTIC OR PROPHETIC?

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Edited by

Kuncheria Pathil

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

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## Priestly Ministry in the Church Cultic or Prophetic?

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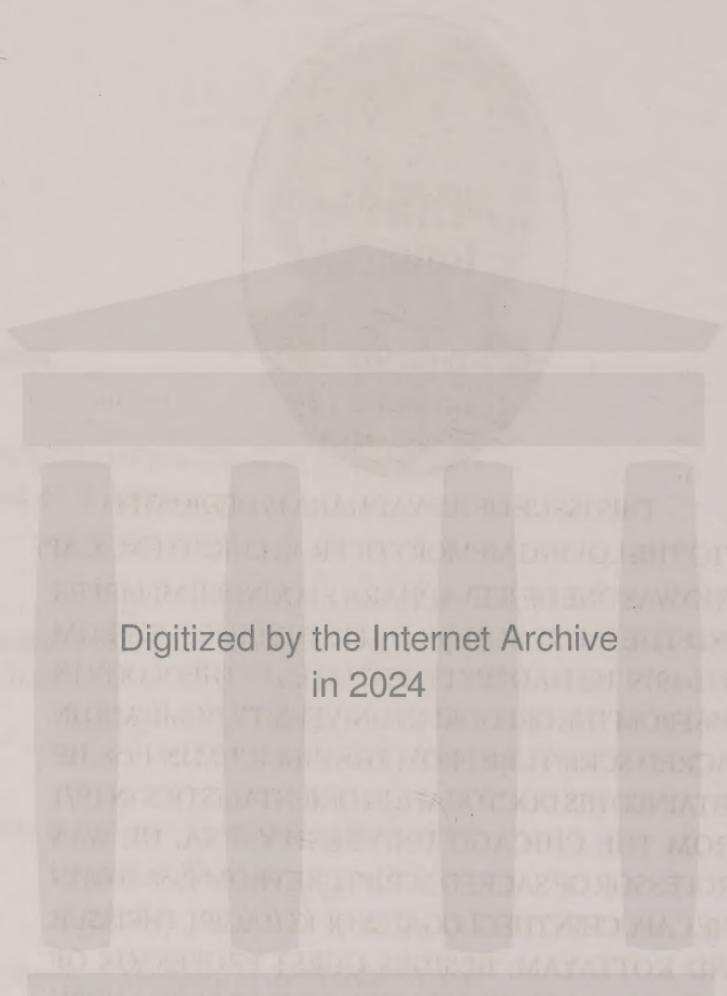
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THIS ISSUE OF JEEVADHARA IS DEDICATED  
TO THE LOVING MEMORY OF FR. K. LUKE O.F.M. (CAP)  
WHO WAS ONE OF JEEVADHARA'S FOUNDER MEMBERS  
AND THE FIRST EDITOR OF ITS BIBLE ISSUE FROM  
1971-1979. HE HAD HIS LICENTIATES IN THEOLOGY IN  
1956 FROM THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY, ROME AND IN  
SACRED SCRIPTURE FROM THE BIBLICUM IN 1958. HE  
OBTAINED HIS DOCTORATE IN ORIENTALISTICS IN 1971  
FROM THE CHICAGO UNIVERSITY, USA. HE WAS  
PROFESSOR OF SACRED SCRIPTURE FROM 1958-2008 IN  
THE CAPUCHIN THEOLOGATES OF KOTAGIRI, THRISUR  
AND KOTTAYAM, BESIDES GUEST PROFESSOR OF  
SEVERAL OTHER SEMINARIES. HE WAS ALSO A VERY  
NOTED LINGUIST. HE CO-OPERATED WITH JEEVADHARA  
IN TRANSLATING THE NEW TESTAMENT INTO  
MALAYALAM FROM THE ORIGINAL, WHICH ST JOSEPH  
PRESS, MANNANAM HAS BEEN PUBLISHING FROM 1978.

WE EXPRESS OUR GREAT SORROW AT HIS DEATH ON 10-06-2010.

Joseph Constantine Manalel  
Founder-Director



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## **Editorial**

On the occasion of the 150th death-anniversary of St. John Maria Vianney, Pope Benedict XVI presented the saint as the model for all priests in the Catholic Church and declared June 2009-June 2010 as the “Year of Priests”. The Pope called the entire Church to deeply reflect on the priestly ministry today and renew the image of the priest for our challenging times. The Pope also asked the entire people of God to pray for their priests, support them and strengthen them at a time of crisis in the vocation to priesthood. This number of *Jeevadharma* explores the concept of priestly ministry in the Church and the challenges it faces today.

In the opening article the editor of this Number outlines the development of the patterns of ministry in the Church. The early Christian communities did not have a category of people called “priests”. It was a community of equals , where no one was superior or inferior. But the community had a variety of ministries, such as, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, healing, consoling and serving the needy. These specific ministries were carried out by people like Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, Deacons and Deaconesses and others. Later on, the ‘elders’ of the community (presbyters) were called “priests”. The function of bishops, presbyters and deacons was to continue the ministry of Jesus by proclaiming the message of the “Kingdom of God”. It was more of a “prophetic” ministry than a “priestly” or cultic ministry. In the second article Dr. Joseph Pathrapankal presents the idea of Christian Priesthood in contrast to the priesthood of the Old Testament and in the context of the priesthood of Christ as presented in the *Letter to the Hebrews*. The Old Testament priesthood was the prerogative of some priestly families. It was a cultic priesthood, limited to the temple in offering the sacrifice of animals and certain things. Priesthood of Jesus Christ belonged to another order, quite different from OT temple priesthood; it was ‘according to the

order of Melchizedek'. Christian priesthood is according to this new pattern and model of Jesus Christ. It is a call to offer oneself, one's own life, for the service and for the salvation of all.

In the third article Dr. Dominic Veliah highlights the 'Catholic' understanding of the priestly ministry, which is holistic. According to Raymond Brown, a priest is a disciple, an apostle, a leader of the community and one who presides over the community worship. The author also highlights the Indian ethos and context and articulates the function of the Catholic priest in an inclusive way both in the Christian community and in the society at large. The path he has to travel cannot be defined. He quotes the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, "Wayfarer! There is no way. The way is made by walking". In the fourth article Dr. Thomas Kollamparampil presents the 'Syrian vision' of Christian priesthood. The mainstream Christianity gives more emphasis on the total newness of the new covenant and the new priesthood in Christ which abolished the OT priesthood by way of substitution. The Syrian vision and tradition, according to the author, presents a 'broader and coherent picture of Christian priesthood with the idea of continuity and integration of the Old and New Testaments. This vision of the nature and function of priesthood is thoroughly biblical, concretely anthropological and participative in nature. In the last article Dr. Jose Nandhikkara presents Bl. Kuriakos Elias Chavara as a model of priests today and highlights his *darsan* (vision) and *tapas* (mission). Bl. Chavara was a genius who whole-heartedly devoted himself to fulfil God's will in all circumstances and championed pioneering efforts in religious, ecclesial, liturgical, pastoral, spiritual, social, educational, cultural, and administrative fields.

The philosophy and theology of priesthood differs according to each religion, culture and history. The Catholic understanding of ordained ministry and priestly ministry developed in history in interaction with different religions, cultures and changing times. There is no ready-made theology of priesthood and ministry. According to the changing times and needs, priestly ministry in the Church has to be redefined, reformed and patterned on ever new ways. But the call to serve and sacrifice oneself for the people as Christ did will always remain the perennial model.

**Dr. Kuncheria Pathil**

Associate Editor

# **Priestly Ministry in the Church: Cultic or Prophetic ?**

## **Kuncheria Pathil**

The early Christian communities did not have a category of people called "priests". It was a community of equals , where no one was superior or inferior. But the community had a variety of ministries, such as, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, healing, consoling and serving the needy. These specific ministries were carried out by people like Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, Deacons and Deaconesses and others Later on, the 'elders' of the Community (presbyters) were called "priests". The function of the bishops, presbyters and deacons was to continue the ministry of Jesus by proclaiming the message of the "Kingdom of God". It was more of a "prophetic" ministry than a "priestly" or cultic ministry. The author underlines this view and explains the historical development of the patterns of Christian ministry and introduces the present challenges.

### **Introduction**

Priesthood in the Church had been often presented in very exalted and glorious terms by many saints. St. John Vianney's words are famous: 'Oh! How glorious is the state of a priest..... God obeys him ! When he utters a few words, God listens him and descends from heaven and makes his aboard in a small bread'. In the same vein, St. Francis of Assisi declared unambiguously : 'If I happen to meet on the way an angel and a priest, first I will salute the priest, and then the angel. For it is the priest who offers us the Lord'.

On the other hand, there had been calculated attempts and movements to devalue and tarnish the image of the priesthood in the Church ever since the Protestant Reformation which was an anticlerical and lay movement. For some radical Protestants, priestly ministry in the church is a distorted historical development. Ministry of Christ and the ministry of the Apostles is entrusted to the entire Christian community. Any member of the community can preach the word and administer the sacraments without any special authorization or ordination.

Some years ago a serious controversy triggered in one of the catholic dioceses in Kerala. Some priests in the diocese argued vehemently that there is no trace of a category of people called “priests” in the NT Christian communities. “Priesthood” in the Church is a distorted later development. This debate caused in the various priestly forums of the diocese a lot of confusion. At that juncture, I was called by the Bishop of that diocese to address the entire Presbyterium in a workshop for about two days. I don’t want to say now the answers I gave to the queries of the priests or the clarifications I made on this question. But my own approach and clarifications are in a way reflected all through this article. In anticipation, I want to say that it is Vatican II which corrected the imbalance in the theology of the ordained ministry made by the Council of Trent. Over against the Reformers’ view on the priesthood of all Christians, Council of Trent overemphasized the hierarchical nature of Priesthood, its inherent sacred power and isolated it from the community of the Church.<sup>1</sup> Vatican II underlined the role of ordained ministry as the continuation of the ministry of Christ in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, focusing thus more on its prophetic function rather than its priestly or cultic function.<sup>2</sup>

### **Ministry of Jesus and that of the Church**

Ministry of the Church has its origin in the ministry of Jesus, who came to proclaim the Kingdom of God and to establish it. His ministry is traditionally understood and explained in terms of his triple role, as

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- 1 J. Jedin, *The History of the Council of Trent*, Vol.2 (Edinburgh, 1961), pp. 370 -395.
- 2 AG 6, 16, 19, 20, 38; LG 18 – 29; P. E. Fink, “The Priesthood of Jesus Christ in the Ministry and Life of the Ordained”, in R. Wister, *Priests: Identity and Ministry* (Wilmington, 1990), pp. 71 -91; PO 4 – 6.

prophet, priest and king (shepherd), for the establishment of the Kingdom of God. However, Jesus never claimed himself to be a prophet, priest or king. It was the early church and the Fathers of the Church who attributed to him these titles. In fact, Jesus often appears in the Gospels non-clerical and even anti-clerical, criticizing Jewish Priests and priesthood and its cult. "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'what I want is mercy, not sacrifice'" (Mt. 9:13; Hosea 6 : 6 ; 18 : 11). The only priestly figures in his parables were the priest and the Levite who were put to shame by the Good Samaritan.

Though Jesus did not call himself a priest, the early Church clearly presented Jesus as priest. It was Letter to the Hebrews which gave a systematic presentation of the priesthood of Jesus : Jesus is constituted and proclaimed a priest for ever in the power of the spirit due to his solidarity with the whole humankind and due to his divine Sonship ( 5 : 5;7 : 20ff; 2 : 17; 4: 15 ; 7 : 26). As High Priest Jesus seals the new eschatological covenant and expiates sin by offering himself once for all the perfect sacrifice ( 7 : 27 : 9 : 24 – 28 ; 10 : 10 ). It is not a cultic ritual or sacrifice, but his own self-gift or self-sacrifice, unlike the sacrifices of the Levitical cult ( 9 : 24 – 26 : 10 : 5 : 10 : 11). Therefore, the priesthood and priestly action of Christ renders obsolete all other priesthood and cult. In this eschatological era therefore, there is only one priest, Jesus the unique mediator and his unique self-sacrifice. On the one hand, Jesus therefore abolished all other priesthood and cult. On the other hand, he radically renewed priesthood and sacrifice by radically spiritualizing and interiorizing it. It consisted not in offering things or animals as sacrifice, but in his total self-gift. "The son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10 : 45). In this self-gift or self-sacrifice of Jesus we see the climax and inseparable link among his prophetic, priestly and pastoral roles.

Christian community, therefore, does not have a priesthood in the sense of the Old Testament or that of any other religion. It is a radically new priesthood for proclaiming the unique reconciliation brought once for all by Christ and by offering oneself as a sacrifice for all, by following the supreme example of Christ. It is a participation in the priesthood of Christ. The only priestly action of the Church and its ministers is to make present and effective the saving action of Christ in the Christian community and in the world by the proclamation of the Word, which is ultimately a prophetic action.

## Diversity of Ministries in the NT

The Church as community of Jesus' disciples was a community in freedom, equality and fraternity. It was a community where all were equals, and no one superior or inferior. All were brothers and sisters, and no one was above them as their master, except Jesus the One Master. The style and functioning of this earliest community is depicted in Mt 18: 1 – 20. Deviations, mistakes and failures were usual in the community. Failing members were corrected by others. When disputes arose, final word was to the decision of the whole community. They experienced the living presence of their Lord Jesus in the midst of the community, especially when they gathered for prayer and the breaking of the bread. Every member of the community was fully aware of his / her mission of proclaiming God's Kingdom and of making disciples of Jesus. Members of the community had different gifts or charisms, functions and ministries, and everyone used it for the building up of the community.

We do not have a clear picture of the specific ministries of the NT, their origin, patterns and development. One thing we can say for certain. All the Apostolic Churches did not have a uniform pattern of ministries. As different ministries were in the process of formation and development, they were varied, fluid and flexible. One more thing we can affirm with certainty: Earliest Christian communities did not have a group of professional "priests", distinct from other members. The term "priest" is used in the NT only for Jewish priests (Mk 1 : 44; Lk 1:5; Acts 4: 7) and Gentile priests (Acts 14 :13). Leadership and ministerial patterns of the early Christian communities were taken from the Jewish Synagogue model and not from the Temple model of Priests and High Priests. Naturally in the Palestinian Christian communities they most probably copied the system of "Elders" and "Council of Elders" of Judaism which were secular offices for the administration of the communities.

Based on the scanty references in the NT books, we may affirm two things: (i) Earliest Christian communities had a variety of ministries, such as, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, healing, consoling and serving the needy. These specific ministries were carried out by people like Apostles, Prophets, Teachers, Deacons and Deaconesses. Among them the Apostles stand out clearly as the eminent leaders and ministers whom Jesus himself appointed with specific authority and commissioning

them to continue his ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. (ii) A second point we may affirm is that during the NT period itself we can see the process of a development in the overall ministry of co-ordination and leadership of the Christian communities leading to a threefold pattern of ministry of Bishops, Presbyters and Deacons (*Episcopoi, Presbuteroi and Diakonoi*). This development was consolidated by the end of the first century and beginning of second century as seen in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Further details are not necessary here.<sup>3</sup>

### **Development of Sacerdotalism and Clericalism**

The ministers of the early Church, *Episcopoi, Presbuteroi and Diakonoi*, had nothing to do with the pagan and Jewish 'priestly class'. The original Christian ministry was clearly distinct from the cultic ministry of both the Jewish and pagan priesthood. But from the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century we see that the Jewish and gentile 'priestly terminology' and titles were gradually used for the Christian ministers of bishops, presbyters and deacons.

There were several reasons for such development:

(1) The early Christians did not consider themselves as a separate group over against their Jewish brethren, rather as a new group within Judaism and they continued to go to the temple and the synagogues. Gradually the rift between Jews and Christians became widened, especially with the rise of gentile Christianities, and the Christians dissociated themselves from Judaism at all levels, social, cultural and religious.

(2) As gentile Christianities became widespread and very powerful, they became more and more inculcuated in the gentile milieu and they adopted the pagan religious and cultural patterns and 'priestly' terminology. They increasingly felt at home with the 'cultic priesthood' to replace the pagan mysteries and priesthood.

(3) Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in the first century and the Jews were persecuted and were scattered from their homeland. On the other hand, the Christian community consolidated itself and wanted to function as a separate religion. They saw themselves as the

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3 Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change* (London: SCM, 1981), pp. 5 – 35; Hans Kueng, *Why Priests*, (London: Collins, 1972), pp. 25 – 36.

'new Israel' and affirmed their continuity with Israel, and gradually assumed the Jewish religious terminology and 'priestly' terminology.

(4) Perhaps, the most important reason for the development of 'sacerdotalism' in the Church is the mystification of the presbyter's function of presiding at the 'breaking of the bread' (Eucharist), which was gradually conceived as the mystical renewal of the 'sacrifice of Christ'. This function became gradually the privilege and power of the presbyter who naturally became the 'priest' to offer the sacrifice. The 'breaking of the bread' and the Lord's Supper gradually became the Eucharistic Sacrifice on the Altar in a Sanctuary, 'the Holy of Holies of the New Israel', and liturgy and liturgical rules, rubrics and gestures became very complex. Naturally, the sacraments became more important than the 'ministry of the Word'.

Thus by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries the synagogue terminology was replaced by the temple terminology and the presbyters of the Christian community became the 'priests' and the bishops became the 'high priests'. The development probably started from the top, from episcopos, who was considered as the 'High Priest', offering the mediating sacrifice to God for the people. The *Apostolic Tradition of Hypolitus* presents the Bishop's office as the 'High Priestly Office'. The terminology of 'priest' for the presbyter was probably in vogue as the next step.<sup>4</sup> The sacred power and special privilege of the bishops and presbyters gradually was extolled both in terms of liturgy and power of jurisdiction and they became a 'separate priestly class' over against the common people in the Church. The 'priestly function' of the ministers was overemphasized at the expense of their prophetic and pastoral functions. Elders of the synagogues were closer to the people whereas the 'priests of the temple' were remote from the people and functioned as a 'separate class'.

The secular and political power of the clergy in the Christianity of the Roman Empire widened the gulf between the clergy and the common people. The clergy, especially the higher clergy, was granted special privileges and rights equal to the rank of senators by the emperors. They began to distinguish themselves from the people by special dress and *insignia* to manifest their special status and rank.

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4 James A. Moehler, *The Origin and Evolution of the Priesthood*, New York: Alba House, 1970, pp. 49-52.

The landed property of the Church became more and more accumulated and the bishops were engaged more and more in the administration of the temporalities than in the ministry of the Word. As the Roman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire became gradually disintegrated, the Church became completely independent and the authority of ecclesiastical hierarchy was understood and defined in terms of secular power and jurisdiction. Thus the Church hierarchy of the middle ages became more and more separated from the common people and they indulged themselves in worldliness, corruption and power politics that led to the tragedy of Protestant Reformation.

### **Theology of Ordained Ministry Today**

Vatican II dealt with the ordained ministry in the Church in several of its documents, such as, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, *Decree of Bishops*, *Decree on Priests*, and *Decree on Priestly Formation*. But council's intention was not to elaborate on a theology of ordained ministry, rather it was more pastoral. Even the post – Vatican II magisterial documents of synods of Bishops 1971, 1987 and 1990 and post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992) do not give a clear and full-fledged theology of Ordained ministry and Priestly ministry. But they provide new perspectives and orientations to understand the Ordained Ministry in a new way. These perspectives derive from a new understanding of the theology of the Church initiated by Vatican II. I shall try to introduce briefly some of these new perspectives and orientations:

1. The new understanding of the Church as the 'People of God' made a radical shift in the understanding of ministry. The Church is no more conceived as a visible institution governed by a hierarchy but as a mystery, as the people of God, as a community of believers, as the Body of Christ, where Christ alone is the Head. The community is prior to the hierarchy and ministers. Ministers are situated in the community in which they are performing certain functions. Ordained ministry is seen in the context of the ministry of the whole people of God. Every member of the community participates in the three-fold mission and ministry of Christ, as prophet, priest and shepherd.<sup>5</sup> Ordained ministers do not have a monopoly of all ministries and they are

not the exclusive channels of the spirit. Here the clerical view of the church gave way to an ecclesial view of ministry.<sup>6</sup>

2. In the new understanding of the Church, those who are in authority in the Church are not to rule others; they do not possess any inherent, magical “power”, but they are called to serve the other members of the Church. Ministries in the Church, whether ordained or not, are charisms and call to serve the community. An ordained minister is first and foremost a Christian, a member of the Church, sharing in the common call of all Christians. *Lumen Gentium* quotes St. Augustine : “What I am for you terrifies me, what I am with you consoles me. For you I am a Bishop, but with you I am Christian. The former is a title of duty, the latter one of grace. The former is danger; the latter is salvation”.<sup>7</sup> The title of the Pope as “Servant of the servants” is indeed a real title and not a mere external label to cleverly camouflage the public’s eyes. The NT word for service is *diakonia* which means “serving at the table”, a task of the slaves. Vatican II very frequently uses the word service, *diakonia*, for explaining the function of ordained ministers. The Council really means it, as Jesus himself repeatedly admonished his disciples to be at the service of others, as He did. This new image of the ordained minister is yet to be translated into real ecclesial praxis.
3. Christ is the sacrament of salvation, and the Church being His Body is destined to be the sacrament of salvation. The ordained ministers are instrumental in actualizing the sacramental function of the church. The ordained ministers by the fact of ordination do not possess my inherent power to be passed on, but they only become the official representatives, instruments and agents for the action of Christ and the Spirit who alone is the only real

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6 Bp. Cyprian of Carthage is a typical example of a clerical view of the Church. For Cyprian there is no Church out side the Bishop. The Bishop is primary and prior to the Church. Episcopate is the principle of the unity of the Church. “...the Bishop is in the Church, and the Church in the Bishop; and if anyone be not with the Bishop, that he is not in the Church..” (*Letter 68*). Of course, we can understand the view of Cyprian at a time when the unity of the Church was threatened under various schismatic and heretical Bishops. Cyprian appealed the people to stay with the legitimate Bishop in Apostolic succession.

minister of the church.<sup>8</sup> Christ and His spirit resides in the Church, in the community. Therefore ministry is essentially based on the Church and not vice-versa. As mentioned above, the church is prior to ministers and ministry. The sacramental character of ordained ministry clearly highlights its Christological, Pneumatological and ecclesial understanding and dismisses any inherent, magical power in the ordained minister.

4. Therefore, ordained ministers like priests are not mere representatives and assistants of Bishops. They really participate in the triple mission and ministry of Jesus as Prophet, Priest and Shepherd.<sup>9</sup> The common sharing of the mission and ministry of Jesus both by bishops and priests, though in different grades and levels, is the basis for the unity between bishops and priests.<sup>10</sup> Both are in fact subordinated to Christ and His spirit, and both are representatives and instruments of Christ.
5. The triple ministry, prophetic, priestly and shepherding are integral parts of one and the same mission and ministry of Jesus which is human salvation or the realization of the Kingdom of God. The three roles are inter-related and co-related. All of them demanded self-emptying, self-giving or self-sacrifice that alone will realize salvation or the kingdom of God. These three roles cannot be seen as clearly distinct or separate, though we may distinguish them. This three fold category and scheme goes back to the OT where three categories of people were anointed – priests, prophets and kings. Fathers of the Church applied it to Christ (*Christos* = anointed one) to express the fullness of the mission of Christ. These three functions unfold the one and the same mission of Christ. The triple function of ordained ministers is to be understood in the same way as one integral mission and ministry.
6. In the triple ministry the central role is *the proclamation of the Word of God* which is explicitly the prophetic or teaching function.<sup>11</sup> The proclamation of the Word of God does not mean

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8 LG 21, 28; *Constitution on Liturgy*, 7.

9 *Decree on Priestly Ministry*, 1, 2, 5.

10 *Ibid.*, 7.

11 LG 23; *Christus Dominus* 12; *Decree on Priestly Ministry* 4.

merely doctrinal teaching or communicating some ideas or catechesis. The Word of God transforms and recreates by the transforming and creative power of the Word of God. It does not mean that the priestly and shepherding (governing) functions are unimportant and secondary. These three functions are penetrating each other and become integrated into one mission. The same Word of God has also sanctifying and governing (gathering) function. The community is gathered, unified, sanctified and transformed by the power of the Word of God.<sup>12</sup> Proclamation of the Word of God leads to faith, which gathers, unifies, sanctifies and transforms the community. Therefore, conceiving priestly function in a narrow way as something cultic related to liturgies, rituals and sacraments is a much distorted view. The primary role of the ordained minister in the Church is definitely the proclamation of the Word of God.

7. The Celebration of the Eucharist is not a mere “cultic” activity or “priestly” function. It is the climax of the Church’s proclamation of the Word of God where all the three functions of the minister – prophetic, priestly and pastoral – are integrated and interpenetrated. Celebration of the Eucharist is the most effective preaching of the Word of God by which the community is gathered, unified, sanctified and transformed and by which the Church is thus constituted.<sup>13</sup> In the celebration of the Eucharist both the ordained ministers and the people not only exercise their “priestly” function of actually representing the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, but also their prophetic function of proclamation of the Word and their pastoral function of gathering and uniting the community.<sup>14</sup>

### The New Challenges

For the ordained ministers and priests in the church, challenges and opportunities are plenty today : They should realize that they are not mere cultic functionaries or “poojaries” within the four walls of the churches. It is a call for leadership in the community, and this leadership

12 LG 25; *Christus Dominus* 11; *Decree on Priestly Ministry* 2, 4.

13 LG 26, 28.

14 *Decree on Priestly Ministry* 4, 5, 6.

has to be one of animation and co-ordination. The ordained minister shall not monopolize and control all the charisms, ministries and services in the community. Leadership means the capacity and discerning power to recognize and promote the gifts of all the members in the community and channelize them for the building up of the community. Although the ordained minister functions as an instrument of Christ and His spirit in the Church, for the conferring of God's grace and power, he should be aware that he is not the exclusive channel of God's gifts. God is not bound to his ministers and sacraments and He is totally free.

The ordained ministers are first and foremost called to continue the ministry of Jesus of proclaiming the Kingdom of God by their life, mission and witness. This mission and ministry is not limited within the Christian communities by means of pastoral care. They are called to serve the entire people of God, the whole humankind without any boundaries of religion, caste or culture. Their specific ministry today is to build up bridges of mutual understanding and co-operation among all peoples, cultures and religions by means of inter-religious dialogues, activities and liberative programmes. The Good News is that God loves all without any discrimination; all are God's children and He has broken the boundaries and reconciled the whole humanity in Jesus Christ.

There is no ready-made theology of ordained ministry given in Church. Theologies always develop in the course of history in interaction with the new challenges, tasks and opportunities of every age by integrating the Gospel message and its perennial values with the changing times and the real needs of the society. What is called for today is openness to the movements of the Spirit, proper discernment, courage and confidence in faith for taking legitimate risk with absolute trust in God.

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# **Christian Priesthood: in the Footsteps of the “Faithful and Merciful High Priest” (Heb 2:17-18)**

**Joseph Pathrapankal**

The author presents the idea of Christian Priesthood in contrast to the priesthood of the Old Testament and in the context of the priesthood of Christ as presented in the Letter to the Hebrews. Old Testament priesthood was reserved to the priestly families; it was cultic, limited to the temple in offering the sacrifice of animals and other things. Priesthood of Jesus Christ belonged to another order, quite different from OT temple priesthood; it was ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’. Christian priesthood is according to the new pattern and model of Jesus Christ. It is a call to offer oneself, one’s own life, for the salvation of all. It is to symbolize the person of Christ in the community and in the world, a call to be faithful to God and Christ and merciful to one’s own fellow humans.

With all our optimism about God working through his Spirit, often above and against all human resistance and calculations, it is refreshing to understand that God works more through human agents than through supernatural events. The wisdom as well as the pastoral vision of Pope

Benedict XVI in announcing a “Pauline Year” in conjunction with the “Year of the Word of God” during 2008 belongs to this category of divine providence. Calculating a bi-millennium of the birth of Paul as happening in 2008, the Pope announced that this special Year would be from June 28, 2008 to June 29, 2009. But the main focus of this announcement was to emphasize the key role Paul has played in making the Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ and to explore the wider dimensions of the Word. Pope Benedict XVI went a step further with his insight into the inner reality of the Church when in June 2009 he inaugurated “The Year of Priests”, focusing on the role and mission of its 400,800 ordained priests spread out in the five continents. At the very outset it is to be emphasized that the main purpose of this Year of Priests is not to analyze the theological contents of Christian priesthood. The approach is mainly pastoral, namely, to invite the ordained priests in the Catholic Church to a more authentic and fruitful life. As the Pope said: “Lest we experience existential emptiness and the effectiveness of our ministry is compromised, we need to ask ourselves ever anew: “Are we truly pervaded by the word of God? Is that word truly the nourishment we live by, even more than bread and the things of this world? Do we really know that word? Do we love it? Are we deeply engaged with this word to the point that it really leaves a mark on our lives and shapes our thinking?” Just as Jesus called the Twelve to be with him (cf. Mk 3:14), and only later sent them forth to preach, so too in our days priests are called to assimilate that “new style of life” which was inaugurated by the Lord Jesus and taken up by the Apostles.” As Pope Paul VI noted, “modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses”. This pastoral aspect becomes clear from the fact that the Year of Priests began on the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with an ardent invitation to priests to make them formed and tuned to the heart of Jesus, the epitome of the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Hence the focus of this paper is not so much on the theological basis and contents of the ordained priesthood as on its pastoral and kerygmatic dimensions. At the same time, sincere efforts will be made to focus on the central concept of Christian priesthood that we have in the New Covenant which is something very much different from that of the Old Covenant.

It seems that a clarification of the words we use about the term “priest” is useful. Contemporary use of the word “priest” is characterized by some confusion. Standard English language translates both the Greek *presbyteros* and Latin *sacerdos* and its Greek equivalent *hiericus* as “priest”, although they carry quite different connotations. The Greek *presbyteros* means an elder, a person holding a position or trust and respect. This was the case among Greeks and also among Jews. The book of Numbers attributes the institution of a college of elders by Moses to an intervention of God (Num 11: 16ff). After undergoing a relative eclipse under the monarch, the elders acquired new significance both during and following the exile. During the earthly ministry of Jesus the Sanhedrin was made up of priests, scribes and elders. Without any explanation of their origin elders also appear in the early Church in Acts 11:29 ff as those to whom Barnabas and Saul brought the donation from the community at Antioch. In the context of the Jerusalem council the elders exercise in conjunction with the apostles some kind of teaching authority (Acts 15:2f). It is only with Ignatius of Antioch (CE 115) that the traditional threefold division of the Church office into the episcopate, the *presbyterate*, and the *diaconate* is really clear. When the language of priesthood began to be used of the Christian ministry at the end of the second century, it was first applied to the bishop. By the middle of the third century Cyprian employed the *episcopos* and *sacerdos* almost interchangeably. It was only later on that the word priest became a common way of referring both to the *presbyteros* and to the *sacerdos*. It also seems that gradually cultic overtones grew up around these two concepts in the later history of the Church with the result that priesthood as such came to be understood more in cultic terms as related to the celebration of the Eucharist and administration of the sacraments. With the rise of the authority of priesthood characteristic of all religions, exaggerated emphasis on the cultic dimension of priesthood also increased in the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, the accent on the cultic aspect of religion is advantageous for the exercise of clerical domination, a phenomenon seen all over the world in the past and at present.

### **Priesthood in the Old Testament through the Centuries**

In biblical scholarship it is customary to maintain that the New

Testament lies *hidden* in the Old Testament and that the Old Testament lies *open* in the New Testament. But it is very doubtful whether this statement is true when it is applied to the concept of priesthood in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament priesthood was limited to the family of Levi. After the conquest of Canaan the ark of the covenant during the desert period (ca BCE 1300-1250), under the care of the family of Aaron, came to rest at Shiloh, and the Aaronide priests became the officiators at this temple. The families of Eli at Shiloh (1 Sam 14:3), Zadok and Abiathar in Jerusalem and Amaziah at Bethel were also of Levitical descent. During the time of Josiah (c BCE 630-609) all the priests were brought to serve in the Jerusalem Temple and the outlying temples and cult sites were abolished. This centralization gave control of the entire cult to the priests serving in the Jerusalem Temple. Chief among the duties of the priests was the performance of the sacrifices. Only they were allowed to approach the altar, and then only within the context of a complex series of rituals and while wearing specific vestments that symbolized their holiness. While ordinary priests performed the daily functions, the high priest was entrusted with the sin offerings, especially that of the Day of Atonement. Priests also pronounced the priestly blessing (Num 6:22-26) over the people, blew trumpets on festive occasions such as holidays and new moons. Several of the Levites who worked in the Temple alongside the Aaronide priests were the musicians, gatekeepers, singers and the like.

Gradually priesthood tended to assume institutional characteristics with the result that the newly evolved prophetic movement came into conflict with this priesthood. The criticism of cult by prophet Amos is typical of this confrontation: "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Am 5:21-24). Isaiah is even clearer: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of the beast. I do not delight in the blood of the bulls or of lambs, or of goats... Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan and plead for the widow" (Is 1:11-17).

The words of prophet Hosea bring to light the utter failure of priesthood insofar as it could not any more sustain the spiritual climate of the covenant community: "With you is my contention, O priest! ... My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge: because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you being a priest to me.....They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity. And it shall be like people, like priest" (Hos 4: 4-9).

After the fall of Jerusalem (ca BCE 586), there grew up a strong desire to restore the priesthood in its glory. The building of the Second Temple allowed the priests to return to duty. But it did not match the glory of its predecessor. At this time, the ranks of the priesthood swelled, and the Temple dues were not sufficient to support them. So many priests turned to agriculture. Later on their various duties were divided in order to give all the households an opportunity to serve while none were completely dependent on Temple duties for their livelihood (cf. Luke 1:8-9). During the Hellenistic period (ca BCE 333- CE 70) priesthood dominated the nation. The head of the Temple, the high priest, was *de facto* the head of the government of Judea. He represented Judea in dealing with the ruling powers, collected taxes, and was responsible for the spiritual welfare of the people. A large number of aristocrats were of priestly lineage. Many priests were scattered throughout the country and came to Jerusalem only to officiate during their terms of Temple service. Until BCE 163 the high priest had the position for life. During the Hasmonean period (BCE 165-63) the priestly class attained their greatest power and to a great extent they were Hellenized. The priests were leaders of the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin. At this time, the Pharisees began to loosen the hold of the priests on the spiritual leadership of the people. When Herod became king (BCE 37) the rule of the nation shifted from the priests to the secular monarchy. He appointed a high priest, reduced him to a ceremonial role, and deprived his office of its political powers. Later on, the Roman procurators (CE 6-66) appointed the high priests, many of whom bought the office through their great wealth. These wealthy families created an oligarchy of power and prestige and were regarded by the Pharisees as tyrannical to the peasants and sympathizers with the Romans. With the destruction of the Temple and the ascendancy

of the Pharisees the aristocracy of the priests came to an end. Going through these details of the rise and fall of priesthood in the Old Testament there remains little that we can speak about its fulfillment in the New Testament. In fact, we will have to start with something entirely new to see the evolution of the concept as well as the contents of priesthood in the New Testament. This we will not do from any a priori criteria and concepts that are applicable to the concept of priest, but rather through a close analysis of the facts that we find spread out in the New Testament.

### **Jesus of Nazareth the Marginal Jew and the Prophetic Leader**

The genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth is given by Mathew as the son of David within a long list of forty two generations of ancestors, and it is not at all clear whether there was anyone in this list belonging to the priestly class. We can only presume that Jesus was of the Davidic dynasty and consequently of the tribe of Judah. The question regarding the details of his religious identity and his relation to Judaism has been discussed at various levels by Jewish and Christian scholars.<sup>1</sup> The latest four-volume scholarly work of the Roman Catholic John P. Meier has also come to the daring conclusion that Jesus was “A Marginal Jew” with all that it could mean.<sup>2</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the various issues related to the Jewishness of Jesus. Since Jesus was brought up in Nazareth in the territory of Galilee, which was known as Galilee of the Gentiles (Mt 4:15), he did not belong to the category of those for whom the Torah was the ultimate norm of religiosity. Though Jesus did not directly repudiate either the priesthood or the sacrificial system of the Jerusalem temple, it appears that he was rather critical of the role of the priests in the society, especially as represented by the priestly class

1 Cf. Geza Vermes, *Jesus and the World of Judaism*, London: SCM Press, 1983; also by the same author *Jesus the Jew*, London, SCM Press, 1973; *Jesus' Jewishness*, James H. Charlesworth (ed) New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991.

2 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, New York: Doubleday, Vol. I, 1991, Vol II, 1994, New Haven, Yale University Press, Vol III, 2008 and Vol IV, 2009. The book is published with “Imprimatur” and has a total of 3040 pages.

of the Sadducees. His positive attitude to the priesthood of Judaism is indicated only in the healing of the lepers (Mk 1:44), where Jesus directed them to show themselves to the priests for the customary offerings and ceremonies of purification. But the early Jerusalem Christian community seems to have been faithful to the Jewish rituals, such as the official prayers in the Temple, as we read in Acts 3:1. The process of the radical separation of the Christian movement from all associations with the priestly and sacrificial institutions of Judaism began with the critical attitude taken by Stephen who had to fight against the sectarian understanding of the Christian movement (Acts 6:11 ff; 7:37 ff). The only association of the early Church with the Jewish priesthood is given in Acts 6:7, where it is said that many priests joined the Christian movement. We are not certain as to which category these priests originally belonged. The rejection by the Sadducean priesthood of any doctrine of resurrection served only to exacerbate its antagonism to the preaching of the early apostles, whose main message was the resurrection of Jesus. The bitterness between the early Christians and the Jewish priesthood reflects not only the opposition of the Jewish priests in general to the person and mission of Jesus, but also the active role played by them in the persecution of Jesus and his followers by the high priests and their associates. After the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in CE 70, the Jewish Christians themselves developed a sharp polemic against the Jewish sacrifices and exalted the prophetic against the priestly traditions of the Old Testament (Mt 9:13; 12:7).

At the same time, we learn from the four Gospels that Jesus has played a very significant role in the society of his times through his preaching and teaching as well as through his other activities. He originally participated in the movement initiated by John the Baptist; he took as the central theme of his own ministry the nearness of the Reign of God and communicated this theme in a variety of manners, notably through his teaching and actions. This was more in the form of a prophetic movement. He gathered around him a circle of twelve. He directed his ministry to all sectors of the population of Israel, including tax-collectors, the women and the poor. He performed healing and exorcisms. He appreciated the faith of the Roman centurion (Mt 8:10),

as well as the profound faith of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:28). In the Gospel of John we read a surprising statement about Jesus going back from Jerusalem to Galilee. John writes: "He had to go through Samaria" (Jn 4:4). In fact, as a Jew Jesus should not have gone through Samaria, if he were to respect the Jewish traditions and customs. Later on in his discussion with the Samaritan woman Jesus spells out his profound convictions about religion and worship. Worship is not at all to be localized and monopolized by a few people who think that they are the only privileged and authorized ones. Worship must be for all the exercise of the freedom of the spirit. All what happened in the past in the history of Judaism and the Samaritans were expressions of rivalry and competition. The time has now come for all to rise from such enslavement and inaugurate a new era of worship through the genuine operation of the Spirit of God encompassing the universe of faiths and religious traditions. As part of his commitment to the cause of the Reign of God and the new situation that has been inaugurated in the world, Jesus had to violate several meaningless practices of Judaism. Consequently, he encountered hostility from the Jewish leadership. The four Evangelists fully agree on the fact that these prophetic developments undertaken by Jesus paved the way for a final confrontation with the Jewish authorities which resulted in the crucifixion of Jesus. At the same time, the same Gospels with one accord establish the fact that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day and thereby God vindicated the cause he had revealed through him. The risen Jesus sent out his disciples to continue his mission through the power of his Spirit and to be his witnesses throughout the world (Acts 1:8).

### **Jesus Christ as the High Priest in the Letter to the Hebrews**

It is against the background of these considerations that now we have to look at the only writing of the New Testament where Jesus Christ is presented as the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Though the office of the high priest, as such, was an important one in the history of Israel, it was not that office that is attributed to Jesus Christ. Rather he is called a high priest according to a priesthood which stands outside of the Israelite tradition, and hence has its own independence and originality. In fact, it looks strange that the author dared to analyze and understand the entire ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus in terms of a priestly ministry, and here again

he brought in the concept of a priesthood that was derived from Melchizedek, which has a passing reference in Psalm 110:4.<sup>3</sup> The author of this letter has been trying to encourage and persuade<sup>4</sup> its readers, who were in danger of giving up their Christian commitment because they were disillusioned and were fascinated by their old cultic rituals of Judaism. Once again they started preferring its elaborate cultic details to the authentic experience of Christian life, which they had inaugurated through their baptism and the sharing of the “heavenly gift” of Eucharist (Heb 6:4). In the language of the angel of the Church of Ephesus, it was a case of “abandoning the love they had at first” (Rev 2:4). This was a major tragedy for the community of these new converts. It is in these critical circumstances that the author dared to write to them, explaining in all details the grandeur of their Christian call. In view of reaching their mind and heart at the same time, the author explained to them the role Jesus Christ has played in their lives to make them his disciples and followers during their newly undertaken pilgrimage to reach the goal of their life. This mediation of Christ the author has tried to explain in terms of his priestly ministry, establishing thereby that Jesus Christ is the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

However, this full-rounded theology of Christ’s priesthood is not an exclusive and original creation of the author of this letter. The conception is rooted in Christ’s own interpretation of his atoning mission as a “ransom for the many” (Mt 20:28) and more clearly in his words of a new covenant sacrifice associated with the bread and cup at the Last Supper. In fact, Melchizedek also offered bread and wine as he blessed Abram. In Paul’s letters the sacrificial character of Christ’s death is

- 3 It is possible that the Psalmist was pessimistic about the prevailing priesthood in Israel, and so he wanted to bring in another concept of priesthood which he found far superior to the vitiated priesthood that existed in Israel.
- 4 The overriding theme developed in this letter is *paraklesis*, which means “exhortation” (Heb 13:22). The community was in need of a warming up because it had lost its original fervour. Christian life had become lack lustre for them.

clearly marked (1 Cor 5: Rom 3:28; 8:3). Likewise in Paul we find the doctrine of Christ's mediation (Gal 3:20) and his reconciliation of God and humankind (2 Cor 5:19; Col 1:20-21; Eph 2:16). The theme of ransom and expiation of sin is one of the threads that link together all the Johannine writings (Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 1:7; 2:2; 4:10; Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11). The author of the letter to the Hebrews developed these ideas further and established beyond all doubts the inner nature and profundity of the high priestly work of Christ as something, the power and effect of which are still continuing in the life of the Christians. For the author, Christ is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb 12:2). He is also the faithful and merciful High Priest in his relation to God and to the humankind (Heb 2:17). It is this unique priesthood which the author explains as the priesthood according to Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-28).

The most significant aspect of this theological analysis of the priesthood of Christ and its application to Christian life is the author's reflection on the inner substance of priesthood of Christ as understood by him. To start with, the author tells us that the priesthood of the Old Testament was imperfect, temporary and earthly, whereas the priesthood of Christ is perfect, eternal and once for all, which has both earthly and heavenly dimensions. The basic aspect of this excellence consists in the fact that Christ offered his whole being once and for all, and through that he has abolished all other forms of sacrifices of the Old Covenant (Heb 7:26-28). This self-offering of Christ is the central and essential reality of the New Covenant and through that the priesthood of Christ has achieved its ultimate perfection.<sup>5</sup> This self-offering of Christ is something characteristic of the very person of Christ. Making use of the Septuagint translation of Ps 40:6-8, the author speaks about Christ: "When Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and burnt offerings you have not desired, but a body you

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5 Cf. Joseph Pathrankal, "Priesthood of the New Covenant" in *Text and Context in Biblical Interpretation*, Vazhoor: Sopanam Publications, 2009, pp.220-240.

have prepared for me: in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure'. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God.' (Heb 10:5-7). This is the conclusion. The basic difference between the Old Covenant sacrifice and the sacrifice of Christ, and consequently between the Old Testament priesthood and the priesthood of Christ lies in this. The Old Testament priesthood and its sacrifices were all concerned with rituals in which the body of other animals was offered and the priests themselves were not personally involved in their actions. It did not affect them, nor did it effect any change in them. In the case of Christ it was totally different. He offered his own body, his total visible reality, and it was an act which radically affected his personality. Whereas for the average persons the body is the means and medium for *their being to themselves and for themselves*, for Christ his body was a medium and means for his doing the will of the Father, for *his being available to all*, for his *Dasein* for all, to be ready to be broken for all. The body was for Christ a dynamic sign for his ongoing altruism, for his total placing of himself before God and before his people, for his perfect *sannyasa*.<sup>6</sup> The entire earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was an ongoing realization of the will of the Father so much so that he could tell his disciples: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (Jn 4:34). It was not easy for him to remain committed to this responsible task. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus was forced to pray twice: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Mt 26:39, 42). Now that he had submitted to the will of the Father totally and completely, from the cross he said: "It is completed" (Jn 19:30) and then, crying with a loud voice, he said: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46). The resurrection of Jesus on the third day was the confirmation that the cause he had taken up was approved and sealed by God.

But Jesus of Nazareth did not want his earthly ministry climaxed in his death and resurrection to stand in isolation as a distant model for his followers to look at and admire. In fact, he wanted to bring the full

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6 The Sanskrit word *sannyasa* means "total placing of oneself before someone", and it is to be understood as the total commitment to God.

impact of his personality into an abiding and living sign-celebration in view of empowering his disciples and through them the Church he wanted to continue his mission. This is what happened in the celebration of the Passover immediately before his sacrificial death on the cross that was followed by his resurrection. When the Jewish families came together to remember the great event of their deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, Jesus wanted to institute an everlasting remembrance of his total personality as a dynamic sign in the form of bread and wine, now transformed into his own body and blood. The Synoptic Gospels and the first letter to the Corinthians have given great importance to this Passover celebration, especially through the twice repeated "Do this in remembrance of me" in the Pauline tradition (1 Cor 11:24-25). Understanding the concept of remembrance as a dynamic act of recalling the past into the present with its transforming power, we can say that through this appeal Jesus was passionately requesting his disciples to reflect on the meaning of his total personality as a lamb who came to take away the basic sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Through this sign event Jesus once and for all established that, if the grain of wheat dies, it bears much fruit, and that those who love their life will lose it and those who lose their life in this world will keep it for eternal life (Jn 12:24-25). Implied in this meaningful death is the message of resurrection. Resurrection is the best that comes out of a meaningful death. The letter to the Hebrews has something important to tell us: "Since the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death" (Heb 2:14-15). That is what Jesus accomplished through his resurrection. Moreover, through this meaningful act Jesus wanted this sign event to be the beginning of an ongoing transformation of the entire material creation with its inbuilt longing for final liberation, as Paul explains in his letter to the Romans (Rom 8:20-25). Hence the priesthood of Christ is an ever-vibrant and dynamic reality in the life of the Church inviting and challenging his followers "to do this in remembrance of him" until he comes (1 Cor 11:24-26). The Church has to celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ in the Eucharist as the basis of her own death and resurrection in the life of her members.

By constituting and entrusting this sign event of his earthly ministry to the Church as a source of remembrance, Jesus wants his Church to have it as a source of her vitality both in her official ministry and also in the day-to-day life of her members. Through her ministerial priesthood the Church continues to make this remembrance a sanctifying act through which the Church and her members are being sanctified day after day. The members of the Church, in their turn, try to enter into a living union with Christ in this celebration, thereby becoming more and more united to the person of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. Here it is not so much a question of obligation as a meaningful opportunity that is given to them to empower them with the saving work of Christ. For the ministerial priesthood it is not so much a cultic act as a dynamic relationship with Christ, whom it represents in every celebration of the Eucharist. It is not so much a question of what is happening during the celebration of the Eucharist as what is happening after the celebration in the life and activities of both the celebrant and the community. It means that everyone who is ordained to represent Christ in this dynamic remembrance must develop qualities that are proper to Jesus Christ in his relation to God and to the humankind. The entire process of theological formation towards ministerial priesthood should aim at developing the qualities of Jesus Christ in personal life . It also means that each celebration of the Eucharist must be a time for the entire people of God to get a personal experience of Jesus Christ, which they can take back home and put into practice in the various realms of their own life. The letter to the Hebrews has given an insight into two such specific characteristics of Jesus Christ as the High Priest, which bring to light the double orientation of Christian life, namely, relationship to God in the form of faithfulness and relationship to the humankind in the form of mercy.

### **Jesus Christ the Merciful and Faithful High Priest (Heb 2:17)**

The author refers to Christ as a *merciful and faithful High Priest* in the service of God (Heb 2:17). When we go through the inner nature of these two qualities, it becomes clear that the former refers to Christ's relationship to the humanity whereas the latter has reference to his relationship to God. In fact, it is the convergence of these two qualities that makes the healthy and perfect constituting of priests insofar as

they have to represent God before the people and also represent the people before God. Whereas their faithfulness enable them to remain committed to the cause entrusted to them by God, their mercy empowers them to be in union with their own brothers and sisters within the framework of their human existence. Recalling the faithfulness of Moses to God in the discharging of his duties towards the community of the Old Covenant as a pattern, the author presents Jesus as the apostle and high priest of our confession as a more worthy mediator precisely because he is the one to whom the whole house has been entrusted insofar as he is the Son and his community also belongs to this house. The author then exhorts his readers to imitate the example of this faithfulness of Christ so that they also become worthy of entering the rest God has promised to them: "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs" (Heb 4:11). Then follows the beautiful statement about the abiding and creative power of the Word of God : "The Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

The letter to the Hebrews makes a bold theological statement about the humanity of Christ: "It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect (*teleios*) through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. Since the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things... Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect.... Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (Heb 2:10-18). The priesthood of Christ, the core reality of the priesthood of the New Covenant, is the perfect expression of his humanity, a humanity characterized by its faithfulness, integrity, mercy, love and, above all, its altruism. To arrive at that stage Christ had to undergo a whole process of maturing, tasting the trials and sorrows of life and learning obedience in the school of suffering (Heb 5:7-10). The author makes bold to state: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize

with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need “(Heb 4:15-16).

It is this fidelity to God and mercy and compassion towards the people so well realized in Jesus Christ that should stand out as the basic characteristics of all the priests of the New Covenant, and this is particularly so with regard to those who are called to the ministerial priesthood of the New Covenant because they are those who are designated to make the priesthood of Christ visible and active in the entire life of the Church. The priestly people of God look up to the ministerial priests for example, guidance and inspiration for their life in the midst of the world. In this context it is worth recalling the day on which Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the Year of Priests, June 19, 2009, the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. As the Pope aimed at the inner renewal of the priests of the Catholic Church through this celebration, he wanted to show where the focus of this renewal should be set, and this he found in the sublime heart of Jesus, the climaxing point of his elevated humanity. Insofar as the heart is the converging and sublimated centre of the human personality, it is also the most respected and appreciated dimension of a human person. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians: our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. In return, I speak as to children, open wide your hearts also... Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one, we have corrupted no one, we have taken advantage of no one. I do not say this to condemn you, for I said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together. I often boast about you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with consolation; I am overjoyed in all our afflictions” (2 Cor 6:211-13; 7:2-4). Here we have an example of the great apostle, Paul, who tried to live at the level of the heart. Paul was faithful to God and he was also merciful towards his community. In fact, Jesus has invited all his disciples to learn from him: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30).

## Priests, Prophets and Shepherds in our Times

The Year of Priests inaugurated by the Pope is a *kairos* available to the hundreds and thousands of priests to understand the inner nature of the priesthood they have been entrusted with. Unfortunately, for many of them priesthood is basically a cultic reality and it is confined to the celebration of the Eucharist and also to the administration of the sacraments, which often stand in isolation from the rest of their daily life. As we have analyzed above, the celebration of the Eucharist is much more than an isolated cultic event. It is the point of reference for the Church and her priests to experience their intimate relationship to Christ and also an opportunity to derive his saving power for the whole Church and her members. It is the culmination moment of the life of the priests when they experience and express their total personality as patterned on that of Christ. Consequently the entire life of the priests has to be transformed by the celebration of the Eucharist. It means that something more must happen beyond the rubrics of the celebration. It is also a moment when the priestly people of God are guided and inspired to lead an authentic Christian life through their participation in the Eucharistic celebration insofar as they are brought to "taste the goodness of the word of God, the heavenly gift, share in the Holy Spirit, and taste the powers of the age to come" (Heb 6:5).

The Eucharist is also a moment when together with the sacramental sacrifice, the prophetic nature of priesthood also has to manifested. This takes place mainly in the preaching of the word of God. *Dei Verbum* has clearly stated that "from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ the Church unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life, especially in the liturgy" (DV 21). It is through the lively and prophetic proclamation of the word of God that the Eucharist becomes an event that has to transform the life of both the preacher and the congregation. The prophetic mission, which Jesus accomplished during his earthly ministry, must be the model and pattern which the ordained priests have to continue in their life and ministry. The institution of the Eucharist was for Jesus the convergent moment of focusing and transmitting the entire impact of his personality through the broken bread and the poured out blood, wherefrom his disciples should also derive this redeeming power for

their own life and ministry. It is in their prophetic ministry that the priests have to show that they are really *presbyteroi*, namely, elders and mature people, who can guide others, take mature decisions, and can be relied on when others approach them for guidance and encouragement. The prophetic dimension of priesthood also takes on new ways of expression and new challenges in the context of the changes that take place in the society of our times. As prophets, priests have to stand for human dignity and human rights, for social justice and for the cause of the poor. They have to read the signs of the times and respond to the challenges they pose. They have to stand on the side of God and see and evaluate things from their commitment to God and to his people.

To conclude, following the example of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, the ordained priests have to be real shepherds to the people, who know them and love them, and also who are ready to lay down their life for them (Jn 10:11-15). The risen Lord entrusted his sheep to a rehabilitated and humble shepherd, Peter, to feed them and to care for them (Jn 21:15-17). In his turn, Peter on the eve of his life exhorted his elders: “Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it – not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away” (1 Pet 5:1-4).

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# Priests in India - A Prospective Reflection

Dominic Veliah

In this article the author presents the ‘Catholic’ understanding of the priestly ministry, which is holistic. As Raymond Brown says, a priest is a disciple, an apostle, a leader of the community and one who presides at the community worship. The author also highlights the Indian ethos and context and articulates the function of the Catholic priest in an inclusive way both in the Christian community and in the society at large. The path he has to travel cannot be defined. He quotes the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, “Wayfarer! There is no way. The way is made by walking”.

## 1. Situating the Catholic Understanding of the Priesthood

A priest can be descriptively called: “an official religious mediator”. In the first place, the priest is a mediator; that is to say, a sort of a bridge. He is envisaged as one who stands between God and human beings, *mediating from God to human beings*. An example of this “descending mediation” would be the proclamation of oracles, wherein the priest explains God’s will to human beings; and on the other hand, *mediating from human beings to God*: An example of this “ascending mediation” would be the offering of sacrifices to God on behalf of human beings. Furthermore, since the priest is *officially appointed* to fulfill this role, in a sense, his office precedes his individuality.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See in this regard, George M. SOARES-PRABHU, “Christian Priesthood in India Today – A Biblical Reflection”, in Scaria KUTHIRAKKATTEL

It is a core tenet of the Catholic faith that, in the strict and total sense, there is only one mediator who stands between God and human beings, viz., Jesus Christ. According to the Catholic self-understanding, the *only way* to reach God is “through Jesus Christ”; and God relates to us through Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Catholic faith also underscores the fact that a deep and intimate relationship exists between Jesus Christ and the community of His disciples – the Church. St. Paul calls this community of disciples (Church), the “Body of Christ” (cf. Rom 12/ 4ff. 1 Cor 12/12ff.). One consequence of this profound relationship between Christ and the Church is that all the members of the Church *participate* in the priesthood of Christ. Hence the Catholic faith holds that every Christian through faith and Baptism is constituted a priest, sharing in the unique priesthood of Jesus Christ - a reality usually called the “Common Priesthood” or the “Priesthood of the Faithful”.<sup>3</sup>

It is to be further observed that, within the Christian community of the baptized, not everyone performs the same role, not everyone fulfills the same service. There is a variety of ministries and services within the Church.<sup>4</sup> One such ministry or service is the “ordained priesthood” – also called the ministerial priesthood, which is conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The person whom we usually call the “priest” is the ordained priest.

The well-known Scripture scholar, the late Raymond Brown, speaks of the “ordained” priesthood as the result of the coming together of four different New Testament ministries within the Church, viz., discipleship, apostleship, the presbyter-bishop and the Eucharistic

(ed.), *A Biblical Theology for India Today*, (Collected Writings of George M. Soares Prabhu S.J., vol. 2), (Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth Theology Series, Pune 1999), 214–215.

- 2 Cf. *ibid.*, 223 – 225. See also. Donald L. GELPI, “Priesthood” in Peter E. FINK (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, (Collegeville 1990), 1015.
- 3 Cf. VATICAN II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, 10.
- 4 Cf. *ibid.*, 32.

president.<sup>5</sup> In the first place he is a disciple. For the New Testament, a disciple is one who has been “personally called by the Lord” (one who has a “vocation”);<sup>6</sup> Another New Testament antecedent which has decisively influenced the ordained priesthood is that of “apostleship”. An apostle is one who is “sent with authority”; one who has been “commissioned” to proclaim the Gospel.<sup>7</sup> However, the community of Jesus Christ – the Church - has a visible dimension. Consequently, the ordained priesthood also has an institutional New Testament antecedent – “the presbyter-bishop”<sup>8</sup> – which involves a shepherding role. Finally, there is the role with which the ordained priest is commonly identified, viz. “the one who presides over the Eucharist”.<sup>9</sup> To put it concisely, the Catholic understanding of the ministerial priesthood is not reduced merely to “certain activities or functions”, but rather involves the “person” who is called.

## **2. The Challenges posed by the Contemporary Scenario in the Indian Subcontinent**

That brings us to the issue which is the focus of this article - the ordained priest in India and the possibilities open to him. Obviously, the ministerial priesthood has to be situated within, articulated and resonate

5 Cf. Raymond E. BROWN, *Priest and Bishop. Biblical Reflections*, (London 1971), 21. Raymond Brown speaks of “four principal roles or ministries in the New Testament that ultimately funneled into the Christian priesthood, namely, the disciple, the apostle, the presbyter bishop, and the celebrant of the Eucharist”.

6 Cf. Matthew VELLANICKAL, “Priesthood as Call in the New Testament”, in Thomas THYPARAMPIL (ed.), *Vocation: God’s Call to Man*, (NVSC Research Series 1), (Pune 1975), 87- 105.

7 Cf. Raymond BROWN, *op. cit.*, 27.

8 See in this regard Günther BORNKAMM, “*Presbys*” in G. KITTEL, G. FRIEDRICH (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (translated by G.W. BROMLEY), vol. VI, (Michigan 1968), 662ff.

9 The evidence of post-apostolic Church tradition is plentiful in this regard. See in this regard, Hervé-Marie LEGRAND, “Le présidence de l’eucharistie selon la tradition ancienne”, in *Spiritus* 69(1977)1, 409 – 431, summarized in *Theology Digest* 27(Fall 1979) 3, 231 – 237.

with the context of India; this brings along its own particular share of emphases, problems and nuances.

Coming to the Indian context, paradoxically, three of the features which are said to typify the Indian subcontinent, viz., religious plurality, ethnic diversity and economic disparity are also the wellsprings of many of the problems that beset South Asia on the religious, socio-economic and political level.

### **2.1. Religious Pluralism / Fundamentalism**

The Indian genius and ethos has long been characterized by a certain attitude of holism. This has manifested itself in the traditional coexistence of religions. Religious pluralism, despite occasional clashes, was a way of life, a praxis expressed in commitment (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*).<sup>10</sup> There was a *mythos* which sustained this acceptance; understanding by *mythos*, the collectivity of symbols presupposed and lived by a people. The *mythos* situates in reality, offering a framework of reference; the *logos*, instead, tends to demythologise reality.<sup>11</sup> While the *mythos* furnishes a margin of tolerance, the *logos* does not tolerate dialectical incompatibility. The transition from *mythos* to *logos*, to some extent inevitable, has had its incidence on the coexistence of religions. One of its negative repercussions has been the rise of religious fundamentalism in the subcontinent.

### **2.2. Composite Culture/Ethnocentrism**

Ethnocentrism has become another crucial issue for India.<sup>12</sup> Ethnic groups that during the pre-Independence colonial period, enjoyed a protected existence and a high degree of autonomy, have begun to

10 See S. ARULSAMY (ed.), *Communalism in India. A Challenge to Theologizing. The Statement and Papers of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association, Bangalore, December 28 – 31, 1987*, for an overall treatment of this topic.

11 See for instance, Raimundo PANIKKAR, *Myth Faith and Hermeneutics. Cross-Cultural Studies*, (New York 1979), 4ff.

12 Cf. for instance, Felix WILFRED, *Asia on the Threshold of the 1990's Emerging Trends and Socio-Cultural Processes at the Turn of the Centuries*, in *FABC Papers*, n. 55, 4ff.

resent and resist the new situation in which they found themselves as part of a newly-independent nations. These groups tend to feel that their freedom and cultural autonomy have been unduly curbed and unfair demands are being made on them to share their natural resources. In some cases, intruding groups have not only exploited them in various ways, but have also threatened their traditional identity, the fabric of their social structure, their values and way of life.<sup>13</sup> In short, some feel that the reality of the Nation-State has not acknowledged or respected the experiences or self-perceptions of the various ethnic groups and what they consider to be their legitimate due.<sup>14</sup>

### **2.3. Economic Disparity/Oppression**

Economic disparity has been the bane of the nation. At times poverty has been institutionalised and even received religious sanction. There have been moves to correct this imbalance; but at times these have met with opposition. One observes an increasing number of instances where the repressed groups have begun to organize themselves assertively and demand their rights. And not infrequently, this process has been marked by tension, resistance and violence.<sup>15</sup> And this issue has been compounded by the process of globalization and its implications on the subcontinent.<sup>16</sup>

## **3. The Challenges posed to the Ministerial Priesthood by the Indian Context**

During the immediate post-Conciliar period, there surfaced the

13 Cf. *Towards an Indian Christian Spirituality in a Pluralistic Context. Statement of the Indian Theological Association. Fourteenth Annual Meeting, December 28 – 31, 1990, Pune.*

14 Cf. Felix WILFRED, *loc. cit.*

15 Cf. for instance, Walter FERNANDES, *The Socio-Economic Bases of Communalism*, in S.ARULSAMY (ed.), *Communalism in India. A Challenge to Theologizing. The Statement and Papers of the Eleventh Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association, Bangalore, December 28 – 31, 1987*, 54 – 89.

16 Cf. Walter FERNANDES, “Globalization, Implications and Christian Response”, in Thomas D’SA (ed.), *The Church in India in the Emerging Third Millennium*, (NBCLC Bangalore 2005), 60 – 77.

problem as to where to situate the role of the priest.<sup>17</sup> One opinion held that, since the specific function of the priest was to consecrate and offer the Eucharist, the role of the ministerial priest was primarily “cult” understood in the broadest sense, viz. the preparation and animation of the Christian community; in other words, primarily an “*intra-ecclesial role*”. Another group, instead, was of the opinion that the priest presides at the Eucharist which is the source and climax of all evangelization; hence, he has also an *extra-ecclesial role*. In the face of the contextual challenges facing the ordained priest in India, we reflect on certain theological avenues which open up to the second option, while in no way denying the importance of the intra-ecclesial role of the ordained priest.

### **3.1. Retrieving the Prophetic Dimension of the Priesthood**

The Old Testament made a sharp distinction between institutional and charismatic leadership of the people of God. The institutional leaders of Israel belonged to the set structure of Israel’s theocratic society and so were appointed by the appropriate authority or qualified by birth, but are never called. “Calling” is specific of the charismatic leaders raised up by God (and so by definition called) to cope with tasks that fell outside the ambit of what was considered institutional organization. Charismatic leaders were called to initiate new ventures (Abraham, Moses), to meet new threats (Gideon), to resolve problems raised by new economic and social conditions (Saul), and to renew a people grown slack in their observance of the covenant stipulations and their single-minded devotion to and trust in their covenant God (Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah). Every call marked a new initiative of God and heralds a turning point in salvation history.<sup>18</sup>

The Catholic faith, instead understands the ordained priesthood as having inset three dimensions, which are, as it were creative polarities

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17 Cf. Mario MIDALI, “Il Presbiterato nella Missione della Chiesa”, in Adriano FAVALE, *I Sacerdoti nello Spirito del Vaticano II*, (Torino 1968), 402ff.

18 George M. SOARES PRABHU, “The Priesthood as a Call in the Old Testament”, in Thomas THYPARAMPIL (ed.), *Vocation: God’s Call to Man*, (Pune 1975), 66.

in the mission of the ministerial priest, viz., the prophetic, the priestly and the pastoral.<sup>19</sup> Vocation in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, consequently, always involved a conversion and a new mode of life for the individuals “called”, because it was always bound up with an ethical historical and eschatological dimension of human life. So the conversion *metanoia* that the term vocation implies is indicative also of a new mode and state of life both for those called and the community.<sup>20</sup>

However, during the post-apostolic period, there emerged a trend which modified and, in a sense, impoverished the understanding of the Christian priesthood in the centuries to come. It was the process by which the Christian priesthood was conceived more and more in terms of the Jewish temple priesthood of the Old Testament. With the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 A.D., the Christian Jews definitely cut themselves off from the rabbinical stream. The messianic hopes and promises of the OT were seen to have passed to the Christians. The Church must be the true Israel because Jesus fulfilled the prophecies and they cannot be fulfilled twice. So it is not surprising that the inclination presented itself to Christians to interpret and understand their situation in terminology borrowed from the Old Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Given the primary emphasis on the “priestly” dimension of the ordained priesthood, to the detriment of the other dimensions in many circles it is felt that perhaps there is need to retrieve the prophetic emphasis of the ministerial priesthood especially in India given the context of many religions, cultures and poverty.

In a sense, this has been endorsed in the perspective offered by Karl Rahner. He visualizes the mission of the priest from the viewpoint

19 See for instance the document: CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Priest and the Third Millennium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Community*, (Vatican City March 1999).

20 Cf. Thomas THYPARAMPIL (ed.), “Summary of the Findings”, *Vocation: God’s Call to Man*, (Pune), 179.

21 Leslie J. RATUS, “Priestly Vocation in the History of the Church till Vatican II”, in Thomas THYPARAMPIL (ed.), *Vocation: God’s Call to Man*, (Pune 1975), 114.

of proclamation. While it is true that the Word of God reaches its supreme point in the Death and Resurrection of Christ sacramentally celebrated in the Eucharist. *But it is not restricted to this* (italics ours). The Word has to be distinctly formulated, developed, and expressed in new forms corresponding to the concrete situation of the world and people. Hence the Word has a character which is doctrinal, social, sacramental and prophetic. This can be expressed variously as: witness, as inter-religious dialogue, as catechesis, as education, as faith formation; and its climax is the Eucharist.<sup>22</sup> From this perspective, a series of “secular” activities are linked to the Eucharist, inasmuch as they are seen as emanating from the Eucharist and , on the other hand, leading to the Eucharist.

### *3.2. Opening Avenues for the Mission of the Ordained Priest in the Context of a Relational Ecclesiology*

In an insightful study, George Soares Prabhu observes that the family of God which the priest builds is not, a closed communal family as the Council repeatedly acknowledges. It is a family that is open to the world. For the Church does not exist for itself but in order to be “a sacramental sign and an instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of all humankind”.<sup>23</sup> The Church, as sign and instrument must both symbolize and strive for “the unity of humankind” with one another and with God. This promotion of unity, the Council affirms, “belongs to the inmost nature of the Church”.<sup>24</sup> “The task of the priest cannot, therefore, be limited to building closed and self-satisfied Christian communities, but must reach out to the creation of the eschatological human community (the new heavens and the new earth) which lies on the horizons of human and cosmic history (Rev 21/1-4).<sup>25</sup>

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22 Cf. Karl RAHNER, “The Point of Departure in Theology for Determining the Nature of the Priestly Office”, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XIII, 31.

23 Cf. VATICAN II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

24 VATICAN II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 42.

25 See George M. SOARES-PRABHU SJ, “Christian Priesthood in India Today. A Biblical Reflection”, in Scaria KUTHIRAKKATTEL (ed.), A

This view finds a certain resonance in the Conciliar document, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church – Lumen Gentium*. The section referring to other religions is found in the second chapter. It serves to complement the image of the Church as the Body of Christ (Chapter 1, art. 7), with another emphasis, that of the People of God. Interestingly enough, while the former (Body of Christ) tended to highlight the uniqueness of the Church, the latter (People of God) points to the place of the Church in the history of salvation, viewing the Church in its relatedness.

Articles 14 – 16 spell out the membership of the People of God. In this regard, the document uses three significant verbs to express this “belongingness”. With regard to the Catholics and catechumens, the key verb is “incorporated”; with respect to those who are Christian, but not Catholic, the term is “joined”; whereas those who have yet to encounter the Gospel of Christ are said “to be related to” the People of God. Article 16 of *Lumen Gentium* would see these groups as being related to the People of God in various ways: As for the Jews, “that people to which the covenants and promises were made, and from which Christ was born according to the flesh (cf. Rom 9:4-5):... they are a people most dear for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts of God are without repentance (cf. Rom 11:29)”. As for the Moslems, “But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind’s judge on the last day”. For those who adhere to other religions: “Nor is God remote from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, since he gives to all men life and breath and all things (cf. Acts 17:25 – 28), and since the Saviour wills all men to be saved (Cf. 1 Tim 2:4)”. Finally, “those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to lead a good life”.

From such a perspective, perhaps the thought-provoking question which seems to have surfaced in the Indian Church during the

discussions in preparation for the Synod of Bishops on Priestly Formation, can still be posed: Does the parish priest have a mission only for the Catholics of the locality of the parish; or is he not in some way responsible for all those who live in that locality?

#### **4. A Profile of the Ordained Priest as a Challenge to be the “Mutational Man”**

Towards the turn of the last century, English literature in the West frequently dealt with a mythical figure styled: “The Mutational Man”. He was seen to be a symbolic figure who existentially embodied in himself the values and ideals that every Christian is striving for. It goes without saying that, for us Catholics, in an eminent sense, there is only one Mutational Man *par excellence*; and He is Jesus Christ. However, analogously perhaps it could be applied to the ordained priest.

However, culling some of the traits which emerged in the course of different encounters and in the writings especially of Indian theologians, presented below are ten qualities which should profile a Catholic priest in India. They concern convictions which should be present, qualities which are demanded by his very mission and should be assimilated; and specific ways of responding to the challenges which confront us in our context. At the very outset, however, it should be made clear that this list of qualities neither bears the stamp of any authority, nor does it claim to be exhaustive:

**4.1. Rootedness in Jesus Christ:** Jesus Christ should necessarily be the central point of reference for the life of a priest and all his perspectives.

**4.2. A Sense of Belongingness to the Church:** The Catholic faith emphasizes the fact that each one of us is primarily “person” (that is, interrelated in every fibre and at the very core of our being). As a consequence, in every Catholic (and particularly for the ordained priest), there need be a “Community Mindset” which loves the Church, tries to understand the Church and defends the Church.

To the challenges posed by the Indian Context, there is need for a “Both x And” attitude and not: an Either x Or” stance. There is need for a change in the mindset which will have its implications for the way the Indian Catholic priest approaches the three dimensions which

characterize the Indian milieu, viz. plurality of religions, cultures and the abysmal poverty and oppression. The Scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages spoke of the *potentia oboedientialis*. With this neologism, they intended to account for a certain “aptitude” on the part of certain created realities to the supernatural action of God.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps it would not be too much of an overstatement to affirm that Indian ethos, by and large, in its authentic core, has been blessed with a certain openness to the workings of the Holy Spirit.

The Indian genius has been generally characterized by a certain attitude of holism which has manifested itself in the traditional values of coexistence, hospitality and acceptance. One can discern an underlying experience which it has been trying to live and striving to articulate: an attitude of conversion without alienation, of assumption without repudiation, of synthesis without syncretism – a movement towards wholeness and a shunning of fragmentation, a stance which has been called “non-dualist”.<sup>27</sup> This stance involves both a contemplative dimension which is also a deep involvement in the human community and the world, as also a perspective which is relational (not relativist!). There is need to ensure the retrieval of the Indian ethos inasmuch as it is expressive of a genuine openness to the working of the Holy Spirit.

**4.3.** With respect to the plurality of religions, the priestly mindset will call for *BOTH Loyalty to One's Own Experience as a Catholic AND Respect for the Faith of Another*. Loyalty without respect would amount to religious fanaticism, whereas respect for another without being loyal to one's own faith commitment would be tantamount to compromising our own Christian faith. Hence, BOTH Proclamation AND Dialogue

26 Cf. Rino FISICHELLA, “Obediential Potency”, in Réné LATOURELLE & Rino FISICHELLA (eds.), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, (London 1994), 742.

27 It is interesting to observe that the non-dualistic perspective (differently nuanced and perhaps not fully spelt out in its implications), has played a significant role in the thought of several theologians whose approach is considered to typify the Indian approach to reality.

**4.4.** With respect to the cultural plurality, given the composite culture of the Indian subcontinent, what is called for is *BOTH Rootedness in One's Own Culture (which is a God-given gift) AND an Openness towards the Culture of Another without any Taint of Superiority or Discrimination.*

**4.5.** With respect to the issue of poverty and oppression, the Indian Catholic priest will strive for a mode of existence which is able simultaneously *BOTH maintain a Stance of Prophetic Critique in the Face of Anything which goes counter to the Good News; AND yet Somehow love the “so-called evildoer” – the one responsible for this state of affairs;* to maintain dissent and still, somehow not hate the perpetrators of injustice.

**4.6. Knowledge:** In the context of the mission of the priest as shepherding the community, the advice of St. Francis de Sales acquires a perennial significance: “I implore you to attend seriously to study because knowledge to a priest is the eighth sacrament of the Church”.<sup>28</sup>

**4.7. A Listening Heart:** In the insightful text of I Kings 3/12, we read that God told young King Solomon: “I will give you a wise and discerning mind”. This is the text as rendered by the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. However, leaving aside the technicalities of translation to Biblical scholars, there was another version of the text which strikes one as both enriching and evocative, while conserving the meaning viz., “I will give you a listening heart”. Eliezer Shore observes in this regard: “The listening heart is always open, sensitive to the joy and pain of others, offering a space within itself for the other to enter. It gives each person what he so badly needs – an affirmation of his place in the world”.<sup>29</sup>

28 FRANCIS DE SALES, “Exhortation to Clerics that they apply Themselves to Study”, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, Annecy, 303.

29 Cited in Irene KARPIAK, “The Listening Heart; Tuning in for Transformative Learning”, *Proceedings of the 2003 Complexity Science and Educational Research Conference (October 16 – 18 Edmonton)*, 71.

**4.8. Involved in the Dialogue of Life:** The Synod for Asia refers to the ‘dialogue of life’, which has characterized the relationship of the peoples of Asia who belong to different cultures and different faiths. In Asia, people believe what they see. People value persons and relationships, especially those that embody respect, concern and compassion. Asian ethos of humanity is the first invitation to begin our mission. When we relate to people, especially people of other faiths, with basic confidence in our fellow humanity, we discover people’s concerns, values, pains agonies, their love of peace and harmony of life and aspirations which they spontaneously share. It is here we discover their search for meaning, faith their values and yearnings. In this dialogue of life, we discern what the Spirit of God has been doing in them for ages before we encounter them. Hence in Asia, we need to begin with a discerned spiritual knowledge of what the Spirit of God has been doing. This we do in a dialogue of life.<sup>30</sup>

**4.9. Authenticity:** A proper understanding of being authentic: **BOTH to accept our gifts AND at the same time, see them as gifts.** Not only: “Be what you are”, but: “Become what you are called to be”.

**4.10. A Catholic Lifestyle:** The spirituality of the Indian Catholic has to crystallize in a life-style; As Raimundo Panikkar remarks, a life which deals only with structures, theories, ideas and shuns life, avoids praxis and represses feelings is not only one-sided, since it leaves untouched other aspects of reality, but in addition is a deformed life. Reality cannot be apprehended, understood, realized with a single organ, or in only one of its dimensions.<sup>31</sup> “Being a Catholic” is not merely a technique to be used on occasion, but involves not only a perspective but also a way of life.

30 This has been elaborated in an intervention by Archbishop Ignatius Hardoatmodjo of Semarang (Indonesia) during the Synod for Asia. See *L’Osservatore Romano*, (13<sup>th</sup> May 1998), No. 19, 11.

31 See in this regard, Raimundo PANIKKAR, “Philosophy as Life-Style”, in A. MERCIER, M. SVILAR, (eds.), *Philosophers on their Own Works*, (Berne 1978), 197 – 198.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Christianity has been present in India practically from its very inception; as such, it can be justifiably asserted that it has, as it were, taken root in India. But yet in another sense, the Christianity still retains its wayfaring character; it is still on a pilgrimage, in its on-going encounter with the *psyche* and *ethos* of India while existentially realizing its mission. Every pilgrimage involves a certain amount of risk; at times one is challenged to venture along what may seem as yet an uncharted course. It is in this setting that the Catholic in the Indian context, confident in the abiding presence of the Spirit of God in fraternal communion with the Universal Church, is called to continue his journey. However, if this is true of the Church community as a whole, it is eminently true of the person who is an ordained priest.

In a certain sense, the ordained priest is one “who fits no formula”. He does not have a clearly-defined “job description”. Hence, in the concrete, there can be a tension between the vocational and institutional dimensions of the priestly ministry in the Church. Since the era of Constantine, the priesthood has also come to be regarded as a profession as far as the world is concerned. In certain societies, the priest had a function which was recognized and valued by the society in question. This has led to the presumption that the vocation to the priesthood is at the same time a profession. However, as Karl Rahner observes, the tension between the two (vocation and institution) may be so great that it can actually be a criterion of the genuineness of a vocation of this kind that it is impossible to institutionalize this vocation in any calling such as society can recognize.<sup>32</sup> In a sense, the ordained priesthood is (and will always remain) an ongoing challenge; however, the priest is called to take up the challenge of his mission with a little of that trust which has so insightfully been described by the poet Antonio Machado in his poem: *Caminos*: “Wayfarer! There is no way. The way is made by walking”.

From a more personal (and existential) point of view, instead, the profound observation of Raymond Brown is pertinent to the point at

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Karl RAHNER, “Theological Reflections on the Priestly Image of Today and Tomorrow”, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XII, 39 – 60.

issue. The four ministries of discipleship, apostleship, presbyter-bishop and president at the Eucharist, (which historically came together to give us the Catholic priesthood as we know it), constitute both the weakness and the grandeur of the ordained priesthood. On the one hand, the grandeur of the ordained priesthood because of the tremendous ideals these four ministries embody: The ordained priesthood requires the spirituality of a disciple, the service of the apostle, the virtues of the presbyter-bishop and the holiness of the sacramental president.<sup>33</sup>

But, on the other hand, it also constitutes the weakness of the priesthood because it asks more than what was asked by any one man who was in one of these roles.

We frequently read about the identity crisis of the ordained priest. The identity crisis of the ordained priest also results from this. Some priests are concerned primarily with sacramental ministry, others with missionary activity, still others with spirituality etc. However, it is to be remembered that all these have a basis in the New Testament. But what people often do not realize is that there is a basis in the New Testament for the other views as well.

The common element in all four roles of disciple, apostle, presbyter-bishop and sacramental minister is that all four roles speak of closeness to Jesus Christ: Discipleship involves a patterning of one's life after Jesus Christ (the all-demanding call to follow Jesus). Apostleship is a service of Jesus Christ in one's brothers and sisters. The presbyter-bishop is called to be a shepherd – a symbol of Jesus. The president at the Eucharist proclaims the death of the Lord until He comes again. Therefore, in the last analysis, the only identity crisis of the ordained priest truly worth the name occurs when, amid the legitimate plurality of priestly work, one forgets that it is Jesus Christ to whom he is bearing witness.

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33 Cf. Raymond BROWN, *op. cit.*, 44.

# **Shepherding Ministry in the Syriac Vision**

**Thomas Kollamparampil**

While the main stream Christianity gives more emphasis on the total newness of the new covenant and the new priesthood in Christ in the mode of substitution, the Syriac vision and tradition, with roots in the Jewish Thargumic connections, provides a broad and coherent picture of Christian priesthood in the mode of integration. This vision on the one hand emphatically proclaims the new priesthood in Christ and on the other hand, equally envisages the redemption and perfection of the old Aaronic and Levitical order finding fulfillment through Christ. According to the author, this Syriac vision brings in more inclusiveness and profundity to the understanding of salvation in Christ. The nature of priestly ministry is defined, governed and exercised by the economy of the history of salvation. Christ, the Good Shepherd, who gave himself for the sheep is the Supreme Pastor who ‘hovers over’ all pastors and the whole history of salvation. Syriac vision of the nature and economy of priesthood is thoroughly biblical, concretely anthropological and participative in nature. By insisting on the participative nature of priesthood, Syriac vision underlines the mystery aspect and the sacramental nature of the priesthood, both for the orders of the royal/common priesthood and the ordained/ministerial priesthood. Dealing with Christian mysteries through imageries, especially those that are derived from the deeper cultural traditions of different peoples, serve as an inspiration and a paradigm for contextual theologizing and inculcation.

## **Introduction**

The imagery of ‘shepherding’ with its biblical patterns, can integrate very effectively the faculties, functions and goals of priesthood that

functions with a wider net-work of relationality. There are mystical, sacramental, ontological, legal, juridical, structural and organizational relationalities. All these relationalities have their individual and social levels of implications and functions. Accordingly, different Christian traditions, such as, Semitic Judeo-Christian, Hellenistic-Christian, Latin-Christian and so on, have their own patterns of perceptions and visions on priesthood which are essentially complementary. In this reflection the concentration is on the early Syriac-Christian vision on priesthood which is the major surviving heir of the Semitic Judeo-Christian vision that is found all through the Old and New Testament perspectives and views. The attempt here is to present the Syriac-Semitic Judeo-Christian views on priesthood as a much needed complementary factor to the Hellenistic and Latin-Christian views.

## **1. Nature of Priesthood according to the Syriac Vision**

Syriac vision of priesthood is rooted in the Semitic Judeo-Christian perception of the priestly faculties, functions and goals of Adam (humanity) created in the ‘image and likeness of God’. It is a foundational biblical vision on human existence and economy. Adam, the first human, endowed with the faculties of prophecy, priesthood and kingship, is the starting point of the economy of the divine plan for humanity. In the emerging history of salvation these powers and faculties of Adam are seen developing into social institutions. In the manner of the failures of Adam, these social institutions also had failures out of corruption and malfunctioning. As Adam needed liberation, purification and salvation, these institutions also needed purification, correction and perfection. The priestly existence, participation and perfection of Adam in the promises, have attained their goal through Christ, the true High Priest.

The two aspects of priesthood are the ‘sacramentality of the priesthood’ and the ‘orders of the priestly services’. This type of perception and understanding keeps up the uniqueness of the Priesthood of Christ in which all are called to participate according to the nature of their Christian life and orders of services. There is equality in the vocation to participate in the single-priesthood and hence unity, but all do have their own standing and distinct channels of service. In fact, all are participating in the same and only mystery of the priesthood of

Christ that was promised to Adam. In the modes and manners of participation there are diversities.

Syriac imageries of ‘Shepherding’ and ‘Stewarding’ regarding priesthood can depict, both in principle and practice, the interrelation and distinction between the royal/common priesthood and the ordained/ministerial priesthood. Shepherds and stewards do not have any existence apart from their ‘flock’ and ‘household’. They are totally for them and exist only on account of them. At the same time they have their distinct duties and functions. The life of the shepherds and stewards are delineated by the context and parameters of their flocks and households. Their life is in common with their flocks, but having the duty of guiding and serving. These imageries of priesthood explain how there is only one promised priesthood of Adam/Christ and how it is being participated by all irrespective of their order of service in the Church.

*(a) The Uninterrupted Order of Priesthood in the History of Salvation*

Early Syriac writers and writings understood the nature and functioning of the priesthood of Adam in relation to Christ, the true ‘heir of Adam’, as Adam was created in the image and likeness of the incarnate Son who would in history assume, redeem and perfect Adam (humanity). The unique factor regarding Syriac vision is the specific understanding of the reception and transmission of priesthood that emerged in Israel into Christ in the mode of integration. In the dialectics of Old and New Testament priesthoods, Syriac tradition envisages a sort of salvific integration rather than substitution of the Aaronic-Levitical priesthood by the High Priesthood of Christ in the New Testament. The revelation and transmission of priesthood take place through an uninterrupted chain whose source of power, dynamics and fulfillment are in Christ our Saviour. Ephrem narrates:

It (*priesthood*) was handed down from Adam to Noah,  
it reached out from Noah to Abraham,  
and from Abraham to Moses  
and from Moses himself till David;  
then from David again to the captivity,  
and from Babylon to our Saviour.

The people was scattered and cut off,  
and all its traditions ceased;  
the hand of the Apostles passed it on.

Blessed be the Lord of their traditions ! (*Heresies* 24:22).<sup>1</sup>

Ephrem speaks how from Mount Sinai the ‘laying on of hand’ of priestly order goes on uninterruptedly. This is made clear while commenting on the dramatic episode of Jesus asking for baptism from a hesitant John the Baptizer who refused the water of baptism to Jesus at Jordan:

The Most High descended on Mount Sinai  
and stretched forth his hand over Moses.

Moses laid it on Aaron,  
and so it continued till John (*the Baptist*).

Therefore our Lord said to him:

‘It is right that I be baptized by you,  
so that the order may not perish’.

Our Lord gave it to his Apostles,  
and behold, in our Church is its handing-on.

Blessed is he who gave us his order ! (*Heresies* 22:19).

Aaronic-Levitical tradition of priesthood represents the actual levels of priestly exercises, ministry and participation with the incurred

<sup>1</sup> Essential abbreviations: AJT = *Acts of Judas Thomas*; CNis = *Carmina Nisibena* (Ephrem); Dem = *Demonstrations of Aphrahat*; EC = *Evangelium Concordans (Diatessaron)*; ET = English Translation; FH = *Jacob of Serugh: Select Festal Homilies*, T. KOLLAMPARAMPIL, Rome & Bangalore 1997; Heresies = *Hymns against Heresies* (Ephrem); HFid = *Hymns on Faith* (Ephrem); HNat = *Hymns on Nativity* (Ephrem); HResur = *Hymns on Resurrection* (Ephrem); HS = *Homiliae selectee Mar Jacobi Sarugensis*, Vols. I- V, (ed.) P. BEDJAN, Paris-Leipzig 1905-1910 [References to these volumes are indicated with the abbreviation HS + Volume no. in Roman numerals + Page(s) + line(s)]; HVirg = *Hymns on Virginity* (Ephrem); OCA = *Orientalia Christiana Analecta*; OrChr = *Oriens Christianus*; SdF = *Memre on Faith* (Ephrem); SDN = *Sermon on Our Lord* (Ephrem).

imperfections. The type of Melchizedek<sup>2</sup> (cf. Gen 14:17-20; Heb 7:1-10) brings into focus the ideal and elevated levels of priestly existence and participation. Illumined with spiritual revelations, David sought for a type from the OT to portray Christ, Lord and High-priest who forgave the whole world through his own suffering and self-offering (*HS II*, 208, 10,11). David found Melchizedek<sup>3</sup> as the apt type of our Lord; "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 110:4). In him the pure spirit of priesthood was shining. Jacob of Serugh affirms that Melchizedek depicted the Son's mystical likeness (*HS V* 157, 3-6), because he sacrificed to God a limpid soul and a pure heart (*HS V* 156, 15-18); 'he stood before God with a pure heart and with noble thoughts which are superior than sacrifices (*HS II* 201, 19,20), as 'he alone was occupied with the spiritual liturgy to minister to the mysteries of crucifixion' (*HS V*, 5,6). So Jacob of Serugh writes:

Without sacrifices (*of animals*), but by his own suffering he was made a priest; and because of this, the Son of God was compared to him (*HS II* 202, 9,10).

**(b) Spirit-guided Sacramental and Corporate Nature of Priesthood for Participation**

The corporate nature of priesthood is emphasized by the Syriac understanding of the reception of priesthood by Christ from old Simeon in the temple and from John the Baptist at the baptism in Jordan. It was the Spirit who guided Simeon to the temple to receive Christ (Lk 2:27; *FH V*, 69-82). At Jordan with his baptism Christ received the orders of prophecy, priesthood and kingship as if flowing to their original source as well as being grafted to their natural trees. From Christ, the spirit and function of priesthood was transmitted into his disciples and

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2 Jacob of Serugh, *Homily on Melchizedek*, *HS II*, 197-209, Homily no. 41); ET, J. Thekeparampil, *Harp* 6(1993), 53-64; cf. J. Thekeparampil, 'Melchizedeq according to Jacob of Sarug', *OCA* 247 (1994), Roma, 121-133; see another homily by Jacob of serugh *On Melchizedek*, *HS V*, 154-180 (Homily no. 155), ET in *The True Vine* 2 (1989), 30-55.

3 Melchizedek, Gen 14:18-20; Ps 110:4; Heb 4:14-7:28; Ephrem identifies Melchizedek with Sem who was both king and priest, whose priesthood is from his father Noah (cf. R.M. Tonneau, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesium et in Exodus Commentarii*, CSCO 152/153 (1955) Sectio XI, 68; 55).

ministers. All his ministers stand in that pure and authentic flow of the mystery of Priesthood. All such happenings were to carry on the uninterrupted order, guided by the Spirit, according to the plan of salvation.

The mainstream Christianity may be guided more by the traditions of St. Paul and the letter to the Hebrews focusing on the total newness of the new covenant and the new priesthood in Christ in the mode of substitution. But the Syriac vision and tradition, with much roots in the Jewish Thargumic connections, provide a broader and coherent picture in the mode of integration. This vision on the one hand emphatically proclaims the new priesthood in Christ and equally envisages the redemption and perfection of the old Aaronic and Levitical order finding fulfillment through Christ. Hence, this vision is more effectively Christocentric and significantly comprehensive. As the fallen body of Adam was received by Christ, the fallen/failed priesthood too was received by Christ in the paschal mystery. Hence, this Syriac vision brings in more inclusiveness and profundity to the understanding of salvation in Christ.

In the history of salvation one can find how the salvific priesthood is being transmitted and functioning through human agents and situations. All are participating in the one priesthood promised in Adam and the ‘spirit of priesthood’ is being shared and widened to embrace the whole created world in a salvific manner. This ‘spirit of priesthood’ is not anybody’s private property nor is it counted in terms of possession. It is a mystery and can be best participated than owned. It is to be participatively experienced for realization in terms of relationality towards God and human beings. Thus, the Syriac vision recognizes the very corporate existence and sacramental nature with full acknowledgement of the mystery status and participative dynamics of the priesthood. The orders of priesthood are not ends in themselves, but principally different means for participation in the single priesthood of Christ.

### **(c) Covenantal Faithfulness and Participation**

Going beyond the legal and juridical as well as analytical and ontological descriptions, one needs to search and experience the corporate relationality and sacramental participation of the mystery of

priesthood. All are called to participate in the mystery of priestly existence. This participative nature and vision are rooted in the biblical vision of divine-human covenantal relationship. A net-work of underlying biblical teachings are the foundations for this relationship. From the Genesis account onwards (cf. Gen 1:27-31; 2:7-17; Ex 19:3-6; 1Pet 2:9) one finds how Adam (humanity) has been brought into existence and enthroned with prophetical, priestly and kingly faculties and functions. As a priest in the created world, Adam had to be conscious of all the mercies of the Lord, especially his own life as a gift and all other merciful providence to himself and the created world around him. For such a state of his existence and for the gift of the created world he had to give thanks always with his priestly faculties and functions. He had to give thanks on his own behalf and on behalf of other creatures and the created world as a whole. This giving thanks also implies ordering and governing the whole creation according to the plan and economy of the creator Lord. Guiding the whole creation in such a manner would be the best thanksgiving, praise and adoration. This is a sort of shepherding. This, in other words, points to the keeping of the covenant and the relationship between God and humanity in a priestly manner.

Book of Exodus 19:3-6 presents further developments in the covenantal relationship. The Lord called Moses from the mountain in the wilderness of Sinai and instructed him:

‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel. You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all people; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.’

The socio-political, religio-cultural as well as spiritual and salvific nuances of the covenantal life and priesthood are all implied in the above biblical episode. These covenantal stipulations function as the basis of the life and salvation of old Israel. What was fundamental and functional in the old Israel is made renewed and functional in the new

Israel, the Church. This is explained by 1Peter 2:9. The duty of the new priestly people is to “declare/proclaim the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” The ministerial priests have to enable and guide the new people to declare/proclaim the wonderful deeds of God in the present dispensation and continue to exist as a ‘kingdom of priests’ and a ‘holy nation’.

## **2. Christocentric Economy of Priestly Life**

Here the actual dynamics of priestly existence is envisaged and explained with its functional efficacy through the mystery of Christ. There are several imageries and titles shared by Christ and his apostles and ministers in the world. This sharing itself indicates the participative nature of priesthood. These imageries depict the profound Christ-centred nature of the priestly ministry. All such imageries have deeper Semitic, Mesopotamian cultural and literary backgrounds from where biblical narratives carried on. Different imageries are adopted from Accadian, Sumerian, Persian and other cultures. Such adoptions of cultural and literary categories inspire us Indians to adopt, adapt and appropriate similar features from our rich Indian religious, ascetic, cultural and literary categories of thought and expressions. Such attempts are full of promises and challenges for us and will provide a deeper Eastern understanding of priesthood.

### **(a) Fishermen**

The biblical roots of Christ calling the disciples from among the fishermen to be ‘fishers of men/humans’ is seen theologically and pastorally well interpreted by Syriac writings. Ephrem (*HVirg* 32:8) speaks of how Christ, the Great Fisherman, called the ‘Fishers of men’ from Bethsaida (*beth sayyada* = place of fisherman). Formerly they were catching for themselves, but with Christ they were totally catching for the Kingdom. The twelve fishermen netted the whole world. Cyrillona, a late forth century poet, depicts Christ sending the apostles to fish people by the net of the Word from the sea of Baptism.<sup>4</sup> Ephrem describes St. Peter as one who caught fishes for killing, but people for life (*HVirg* 43:4).

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4 cf. Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 177, note 2.

Marutha of Tagrit, a 7<sup>th</sup> century writer, describes how the old covenant chose shepherds and the new covenant chose fishermen. He provides the reason that the old covenant was about a single people, but the new covenant was for many and the whole creation, a sea full of all creatures referring to all nations. Simon Peter drew all kinds of fish from the sea, the world of globalized humanity in our terms. The apostles are sent to the whole world and that even till the end of the world to fish humanity to life. This gives a more inclusive and comprehensive concern to the pluralistic world-vision. Marutha stresses the universality of salvation under the new covenant and the Church continues the work in the line of Apostolic succession.<sup>5</sup>

### (b) Priest/Pontiff

This imagery stands in organic continuity with the Israelite functions of *kumra* (more of pagan and general priest/pontiff as intermediary) and *kahna* (specific to the Israelite and Christian priests). This vision is obviously under the Syraic vision of Jesus' reception of the Israelite priesthood through John the Baptist, son of the Israelite priest, by the 'laying on of hand', as well as through the aged Simeon in the temple.<sup>6</sup> In Aphrahat and Ephrem this vision is integral to the fact of apostolic succession. Aphrahat calls Christ *kahna*, typified by Aaron (*Dem XVII*, 813.11). Ephrem finds the tradition of the 'laying on of hand' from Moses onwards. The line starts with the Most High descending and stretching forth the hand on Moses and Moses laying it on Aaron and that went on till John (the Baptist). Our Lord received it from John and transferred it to the apostles and the Church is handing on that order.<sup>7</sup> Here it is to be noted that Ephrem combines two traditions of the transferring of priesthood on to Christ; one through John the Baptist in the *Commentary on Diatessaron* (*EC 3,4*) and the other through the old Simeon in the temple as explained in the *Sermon on our Lord* (*SDN 50-56*). In another context Ephrem finds Christ receiving kingship from David and priesthood from Melchizedek (*HResur I,1,9,12*).

5 cf. Marutha, *Homily 15*, *OrChr* 3:1903, p 412-14; cf. Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 177/8, note 7.

6 cf. *Dem VI*, 289.22; *XXI*, 964.15-17; *XXIII*, 65.4-5; *XXI*, 960.24-7; cf. Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 178, notes 4,5.

7 cf. *CSCO 169*, Syr. 76, p.84, Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 179.

Jacob of Serugh also holds this tradition of the OT priesthood reaching Christ through John<sup>8</sup> and Simeon.<sup>9</sup> In the Syriac *History of the Council of Nicaea*<sup>10</sup> priests are called ‘labourers’, hence, ‘burdened oxen’ who bring the harvest to all humanity to all sides of the world through the Church as prefigured in I Kings 7:15-26. This biblical episode refers to the temple built by Solomon having twelve oxen (*apostles*) supporting the molten sea, interpreted as Church and Baptism ready for casting. Four sets of three oxen seen facing the four sides of the world. Then it speaks about the ‘apostolic tradition’ in terms of ‘walking’ in the footsteps of the lords, fathers, prophets, saintly apostles, true teachers, based on both the Testaments handed over through the blessed tradition.

### (c) Shepherd

God as ‘shepherd’ of the people comes from Mesopotamian cultural view. It is reflected in the OT and in the NT vision of Christ as the ‘Good Shepherd’ and ‘Chief-Shepherd’ serving as background to this vision. Christ, the Good Shepherd, entrusted his sheep to Peter and his college (cf. Jn 21:15-17; 1Pet 5:2-5). Aphrahat in his Demonstration X, *On Pastors*, speaks about the dedication, hard work and faithfulness needed of a pastor of the sheep. They have to act with compassion and responsibility to bring home the flock (*Dem X*, 2,-4,6). In Demonstration VII, *On Penitents*, he insists on the accountability of each pastor towards the Chief Pastor, Christ, when he appears.

Ephrem summarizes the whole salvation history as the ‘Shepherd of all’ flying down in search of the straying sheep, Adam/humanity, so as to carry all on his shoulders to ascend to the Lord of the Flock (*HResur* 1:2). John the Baptist is a shepherd who opened the door and revealed the Good Shepherd to the flock (*EC* 4,3). John the Baptist passed the sheep to Jesus and Jesus to Simon Peter, the ‘eldest of the shepherds’ (cf. *EC* 9,5; *HVirg* 36:6). Ephrem calls Arians ‘false

8 Jacob’s Homily, *Baptism of our Redeemer* (homily no. 8), *HS I*, 191, 14-193,1; , ET in *FH VI*, 497-524.

9 Homily, *Presentation of our Lord in the Temple*, *HS V*, 454, 11-456,3 = *FH V*, 142-176.

10 tr. O. Braun, *De S. Nicaena Synodo*, Müster, 1898, p. 27.

shepherds' who fouled the 'pure stream of the scriptures' from where the flock needs to drink (*Hfid* 35:9-10).

#### **(d) Leader and Guide**

Jesus is both Leader and Guide in *Acts of Thomas* (*AJT* 10) on the way to the heavenly Kingdom. Jesus is also called the 'General' (*rab hayla*) in military terms (*AJT* 39). 'Watchman' is another title for the bishops. *Didascalia* describes, "Now the sword is the judgement, and the trumpet is the Gospel, and the watchman is the bishop who is set over the Church".<sup>11</sup> This imagery is in close relation to the narrative in *Ezekiel* 33:1-6 combining the roles of 'watchman' and 'trumpet-blowers' at the service of the people, clearly referring to the ministers of Christ. Aphrahat refers to this tradition in his *On Penitents*, establishing the need of giving admonitions like 'trumpet-blowers' and 'watchman' to the people at the proper times (*Dem VII*, 20,26) and reminds the pastors to tend the sheep with diligence and commitment (*Dem X*, 3). Narsai speaks of priest as 'steersman' standing on the ship, the Church, providing warning to all in the night and day so as to protect all from the harmful winds and evil doers, in order to make all sail to the harbour of life in the height.<sup>12</sup>

#### **(e) Steward and Treasurer**

The Syriac *rab bayta* (*steward/master of the house*) is a familiar Gospel title dynamically applied to Christ as well as to his apostles and disciples of all times. The title, *gezabra* (*treasurer/steward*), is often used to refer to bishops and pastors as stewards and treasurers of the divine mysteries. Aphrahat speaking *On Pastors*, finds Christ as the Steward leading all to the unfailing treasury of God's wisdom (cf. Mt 11:27; 1Cor 1:24; *Dem X*, 8). Ephrem finds Christ as the 'treasurer/steward' who provides mercy and forgiveness to humanity (*HVirg* 31:2), because Christ is the steward of priesthood and the treasurer of prophecy (*SDN* 52).

Aphrahat admonishes that priests/pastors, as treasurers and stewards of the divine mysteries of salvation, to administer their duties

11 *Didascalia*, tr. Conolly p. 36.

12 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXXII, 65.

with love, peace and kindness rather than harshness and pride (*Dem XIV*, 9, 18, 39, 44). The authority is given to them to distribute mercy and forgiveness. This should be the spirit in handling the power of ‘binding and loosing’ (Mt 16:19). Aphrahat speaks about the ‘keys’ more in a pastoral sense than ecclesiastical power. Ephrem stresses on the transmission of the order of priesthood (*SDN* 54, 55) and points to Christ’s handing over of the keys to Peter (*HVirg* 15:6). Cyrillona, explains Peter’s relationship and inheritance of powers from Jesus with reference to John 13:8, where Jesus is demanding the need of washing the feet as servants.<sup>13</sup> Aphraht admonishes the pastors to exercise the ‘keys’ with the mind and stance of Christ, avoiding all sorts of arrogance and abuse (*Dem XIV*, 10, 16-18).

#### (f) Farmer and Labourer

As the farmer has the plough, the steersman has ship, the Odist has psalms to praise the Lord (*Odes of Solomon*, 16,1). Christ is a Labourer and a Grain of Wheat in the field (*HVirg* 20:11), as the offerer and the victim in his own person. For Ephrem Christ is the ‘Farmer’ who became the wheat sown and the sheaf which was harvested (*HNat* 3:15). *Acts of Judas Thomas* calls Christ ‘farmer’ and ‘labourer’.<sup>14</sup> In Ephrem this agricultural imagery referring to Christ, his apostles and disciples are much explicit. Christ the ‘Farmer’ came down for the sake of humankind to turn the thorns to roses and lilies by his crown of thorns (*CNis* 33:3,4). Marutha describes apostles as farmers who uprooted the thorns of sin from the land and sowed the clean wheat of the ‘knowledge of God’ in the minds of men. Thus Adam’s family was made to taste from the plant of the Cross instead of the wild grapes.<sup>15</sup> In *Demonstration XX*, 14, Aphrahat expands Isaiah 41:17-20 referring to ‘water’ for the poor and thirsty, opening rivers in the mountains and fountains in the valleys. Here the water is the ‘teaching of the Holy Scriptures’; exalted and humble men of the people are the rivers for the land. The ‘cedars, acacia, myrtle, olive

13 *Washing of Feet*, tr. Vona, 69-70; cf. Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 184.

14 cf. *AJT* 145 (Klijn, A.F.J., (ed.), *The Acts of Thomas*, Leiden 1962).

15 Marutha, *Homily*, 11, *OrChr*: 3,408, cf. Murray, *Symbols of the Church*, 198, note 1.

and cypresses in the valley' are the priests of the people and the holy covenant which are like excellent dense branches of the trees during both summer and winter. From these excellent teachings will go out as 'speech and teaching of the Spirit' as sweet fragrance in every place as 'sweet odour to God' (cf. 2Cor 2:14,15).

### (g) Physician

Christ being called as 'the Physician' (*asya*) or 'the Healer (*m'assyana*) of the souls' are biblical assertions. *Acts of Judas Thomas* calls Jesus 'physician of souls'.<sup>16</sup> Aphrahat calls Christ 'wise Physician' and his ministers also are physicians (*Dem VI*, 9; *VII*, 2-5). In the context of penitence Aphrahat advises the pastors:

O Doctors, disciples of our Wise Doctor (*Christ*), take up this medicine (*repentance*), with which you shall heal the wounds of the sick. For the warriors (*of life*) who are smitten in battle at the hands of their adversary find a wise doctor who devises a remedy (*penance*) for them so that he may heal the wounded (*Dem VII*,2).

Ephrem brings out the figure of Christ as the Physician and Healer in commenting on the episode of the woman with an issue of blood (Mt 9:20) in the *Commentary on Diatessaron* (*EC VII*). Christ is the Physician for the healing of the broken state of Adam (*EC II*, 24), the human nature. Ephrem glorifies the powers of Christ praising his victory by chanting that he is not overrun by sickness and death as he is Physician; not gone astray as he is the Shepherd; did not go wrong as he is the Teacher; did not stumble as he is the Light (*EC IV*, 14). In *Caramina Nisibena* 34 Ephrem develops this figure, explaining how Jesus perfects all physicians and becomes the true Physician, and the 'Medicine of Life'. The prophets and apostles are 'physicians of souls' and they provide the remedies of penance and Eucharist.<sup>17</sup> Marutha calls all apostles 'physicians' and their healing power is through our Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>18</sup>

16 AJT 65, 143, 156; healer, 10, 37, 42, 156.

17 SdF 3,147-165, CSCO 212, syr. 88, p. 26.

18 Marutha, Homily 11, OrChr. 3, 408.12-17.

### 3. Holy Spirit and the Realization of Priestly Life

The ‘brooding or hovering over’ (*rahhep*) of the Spirit in the context of creation, incarnation, Baptism and Eucharistic epiclesis, and for that matter, all prayerful calling on the Holy Spirit during the reception of all sacraments, are in the spheres of priestly consecration. For Ephrem the progress of the salvific economy is, in fact, due to the ‘hovering over’ of the ‘Shepherd of all’ over the peoples and times by carrying all on his shoulders (*HResur* 1:2). Ephrem speaks how the Spirit (the spirit of priesthood), seeing the crucifixion of the High Priest, tore the veil of the sanctuary and went out to exalt the Crucified One (cf. Mk 15:28 *et par.* & Lk 2:27; *HNat* 25:16). *The Book of Steps*, a 4/5<sup>th</sup> c. writing, describes how the visible Church and the priesthood are established so as humanity can carry the ministry in and through one’s heart to the heavenly Church. It is the spirit of priesthood that unites and engenders fruits in and through the visible church and priesthood to the church of the heart and thus to the heavenly church.<sup>19</sup> This explains the needed priestly transformation in all.

#### (a) *Holy Spirit and the Ministering Acts*

Regarding the close affinity between priestly ministry and the Holy Spirit Narsai has great inspirational reflections. Church is the custodian and dispenser of the mysteries. But it is through the mediation of the priest Holy Spirit descends, sanctifies and perfects those mysteries. Church depends on priesthood for the invocation of the Holy Spirit to come down and ‘overshadow’ (*aggen*, cf. Lk 1:35 on Mary, upon Eucharistic offerings, etc.) the mysteries and the people. All are to approach priesthood, the ‘salt of the earth’, so as to be spiritually seasoned and saved.<sup>20</sup> In another perspective Narsai finds priests as ‘pen in the hands of the Holy Spirit’ by which they have command in the height and in the depth.<sup>21</sup> He is the pen in the hands of the hidden power (Spirit) with which the three names of the Trinity are written

19 *Book of Steps (Liber Graduum)*, Homily 12, *On the Hidden and Public Ministry of the Church*.

20 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 54.

21 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 48.

down to paint (depict) the mysteries.<sup>22</sup> Priest, a mortal, earth-born and son of the dust, ask the Holy Spirit to come down and dwell in the bread and in the people.<sup>23</sup>

Although, by nature, the angels are subtle and more glorified than priest, in the act of ministering priest does far greater things. He is greater than the holy Seraph, glorious Gabriel and mighty Michael. Narsai exclaims:

O how slender is the pen of your mind to depict the mysteries!  
And yet there is no painter that is able to copy your drawings. O  
You priest, how great is the order that you administer, of which  
the ministers of fire and spirit stand in awe.<sup>24</sup>

The whole person of the priest is involved in the depiction and administration of the sacraments. Priest with his words, as paint, depicts the mystery; with the words of himself as pen, he draws the image of the crucified one; with his fingers he indicates the passion and exaltation of the Lord; with his words he proclaims the death and life to the ears of the people and finally he distributes the forgiveness of iniquity in the bread and wine.<sup>25</sup> By his hands the priest shows the secret power hidden in the visible signs to the bodily eyes.<sup>26</sup> The feeble priest by the power of the Spirit administers great mysteries for his fellow human beings in order to give them life.<sup>27</sup>

#### *(b) Sacramental Spirit of Priesthood and the 'Laying on of Hands'*

The transmission of the 'order of priesthood' from Adam through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David towards our Lord is seen broadly in terms of 'laying on of hands (*syamida*)'. The sacramentality of the priest is most conspicuous in the symbolic sacramental functions of the priest in the liturgy and religious observances. In such communal activities the priest presents Christ, the High Priest (Heb 5:6-10). He is chosen as a limb in the mystical body of the Church. He functions as

22 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 47, 56.

23 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 58.

24 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 47-48.

25 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXI, 55.

26 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXII, 40.

27 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXII, 42.

'head' that commands, 'tongue' that interprets, 'mirror' that projects the virtues to the community.<sup>28</sup> Priest as 'trumpet' announces the promises and warns the people, as 'guide' shows the way to the fellow travelers.<sup>29</sup> Priest has to be 'light' and 'salt' to provide life where there is mortality.<sup>30</sup> Narsai explains the dynamics of the power and effect of the mysteries performed by a priest independent of his worthiness. He says, "The righteous cannot by their purity bring down the Spirit; and the sinful by their sinfulness do not hinder His descent."<sup>31</sup> This is a more dynamic and sacramental explanation and description than the juridical and analytical approach implied in the expression, *ex opere operato/operantis*. Whatever happens in the sacred manner is out of God's profound mercy alone.

To all the orders of priesthood particular talents are given through the 'laying on of hands' (*syamida*). Priests have to be 'heralds of the Gospel', 'dispensers of the mysteries', and pastors. These sacred ministries are handed on to the succeeding generations by 'laying on of hand'. In the 'laying on of hands', the primary agent who functions is the Holy Spirit by descending on the candidate through the celebrant as the visible instrument of the Spirit.<sup>32</sup> Abdisho and Timothy II associate the sacramentality of the priesthood primarily with the 'laying on of hands' by which Holy Spirit descends on the candidate. This is combined with the prayers and blessings with the sign of the Cross. Abdisho refers to 'laying on of hands' as 'spiritual oil' unlike the material oil used in the OT for the unction of the priests.<sup>33</sup> Timothy II is of the opinion that the laying on of hands and the anointing with the oil in the OT were the types of the true 'laying on of hands' in the new dispensation as 'anointing with the spiritual oil'.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. Shepherding Ministry as 'Clothing of Priestly Witnessing'**

The 'clothing of priestly witnessing' takes place by the power of

28 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXXII, 64.

29 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXXII, 65.

30 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XXXII, 71.

31 Narsai, *Liturgical Homilies*, XVII, 22.

32 L. Arangassery, *Orders of Priesthood*, 123.

33 L. Arangassery, *Orders of Priesthood*, 125, note 72.

34 L. Arangassery, *Orders of Priesthood*, 91, notes, 74-77.

the Spirit. In the ordained priest the ‘spirit of priesthood’ or the personality of the priest and the economy of priesthood function as medium of witnessing. The hovering of the Son of God, as the minister of the Father, all over the history of salvation in all its ages, is the focal mystery. The Son, as *Good shepherd*, hovers over the total process of salvation. The economy of this Son, the Good Shepherd, assumes different images, roles and stages. The Good Shepherd works as healer, surgeon, strengthener, gatherer of the lost and the scattered, guardian, etc. All these are different functions of tending the flock or in other words pastor’s own ‘clothing of witnessing’ for giving himself totally to the flock, in order to provide them life.

#### **(a) Priestly Witnessing and Economy of Priesthood**

The economy of the Good Shepherd is the foundation of the economy of Christian priesthood. It is from the treasury and wisdom of the *Chief Pastor* all are exercising their ministry. Faithfulness of a pastor depends on his diligence and faithfulness to Christ. Aphrahat brings in Patriarch Jacob as a model (Gen 31:38-40). Guarding, keeping watch over and toiling to feed the sheep are the activities of the economy of a pastor. Guarding the sheep requires hard toils and troubles; keeping watch over demands wakefulness without sleep. The Feeding of the sheep during the day needs bearing the parching heat of the day. These are positive manners to be cultivated by pastors in their ministry (*Dem X, 1,2*).

In the economy of the pastoral ministry there may creep in wrong manners. Lack of diligence over the sheep and greediness are common evils. Those who lack true dedication and diligence over the sheep turn to be hirelings (*Dem X, 1,3,6*). They lack ‘integrity of heart’ and ‘skillfulness of the hand’ which are the qualifying and sustaining personal power of the pastor (*Dem X, 2*). A hireling is not a steward or a disciple of Christ. To such Christ never provides the key of his treasure. Aphrahat clarifies: “But in the case of a deputy pastor, who loves farmsteads, merchandise, vineyards, olive trees and cultivation, he does not wish to become a disciple, and so Christ does not deliver into his hands the flock” (*Dem X,5*).<sup>35</sup>

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35 Tr. K. Valavanolicakl, *Aphrahat Demonstrations I*, (*Moran Etho 23*), 222.

Integrity of the heart demands that a pastor be fully dedicated to the ministry without being divided in his heart. This means that one should not have other occupations side by side with the pasturing of the sheep. Such behaviours are tantamount to handing over the flock to wolves (*Dem X,4*). ‘Skilfulness of the hand’ should come out in actual hard work for feeding the sheep. Aphrahat refers to the foolish pastors described by Ezekiel (34:2-4, 9-12, 18, 19):

O you foolish pastors, you cloth yourselves with the wool of the sheep and you devour the flesh of the fatlings, yet you do not feed the sheep, you have not healed the one which was sick, you have not bound up the one which was broken, you have not strengthened the one which was weak, you have not gathered in the one which was lost and scattered. You have not kept the strong ones and the fatlings, but you subdued them with violence. You yourselves graze the good pasture and trample with your feet what is left over. You drink the pleasant water and you muddy with your feet what is left over. My sheep have fed on that which is trampled, what your feet have trampled, and they have drunk the water that your feet have muddied (*Dem X, 3*).<sup>36</sup>

The greedy and wretched pastors are hired servants who do not feed nor lead the sheep well. The Chief Pastor demands the accounts and all faithful pastors will be made to rejoice and the unfaithful would be condemned. The lack of diligence causes destruction to the sheep of the Good Shepherd who put the sheep at the right hand and right eye of the pastors. Destruction comes when the right eye of the pastor wrongly looks for bribes and it goes blind. The right hand that led to injustice would be destroyed (*Zech 11:9,12; Dem X,3*). The Chief Pastor has given the gifts freely and the pastors should give freely as they received freely (*Mt 10:8*).

### **(b) The Goals of Christian Pastoral Ministry**

Christian pastoral ministry is to attain the fuller realization of the economy of Christ. Christ, the Good Shepherd, is the model, the path

and the goal. Christ should be made manifest as the door of the sheep. The whole flock has to become one with Christ (*Dem X, 4*). This involves an ontological type of unity between Christ and the sheep. There should be a perfect merging of the horizons of the sheep and the Good Shepherd by pastoral ministry. The merging of horizons with Christ should not be any sort of a compromise-union but a comprehensive and enhancing union. Those who make compromising union with Christ are hirelings. They do not act in the name of Christ, but in their petty self-interest, greed and end up in dishonor (*Dem X, 4,5*). The end result of merging and integration of ‘horizons’ would be as St. Paul describes: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal 2:20*).

It is through the Church and priesthood diligent pasturing should take place. The Church should be concerned with all aspects of the life of the sheep. This demands a sort of ontological union of the pastors with the sheep. Such ontological union can be depicted in biblical terms in the unity of the mystical body of Christ existing in the Church. The living Church should be present in the political, social, economic and other horizons of the believers. All contexts of war, disease, forced migration, social changes, social injustice, etc., are the times that need feeding in the form of healing, binding up, gathering and strengthening of the sheep by the priests. Christ handed over himself totally to the sheep. As the Chief Pastor, Christ entrusted the sheep to his disciples. The total self-gift of Christ should be sacramentally continued in the world by the pastors (cf. *Dem X, 4,6*).

The manner of leading the sheep is the way of perfection for a pastor, or his way of spiritual life. Spiritual growth of the pastor is according to the manner of his feeding and leading the sheep of Christ (*Dem X, 5*). The sheep is on the move as if in a pilgrimage and on the pilgrim road situations are always changing. A dynamic mode of Christian interpretation, integration and action to promote a culture of life is the necessity always. Pastors should function as ministers of this dynamic integration and action. Such integration involves constant interpretation of the life situation of the people and the formation of true gospel orientations in the life of the sheep. Here we should think of the social changes and customs, economic patterns, job market, globalization process, etc. as the background in which pastors have to lead the sheep. In all such situations a pastor can guide and feed the

sheep only if he has a profound union with the Good Shepherd on the one hand and that with the flock as one body with them on the other hand (*Dem X, 6,8*).

The ministry in union with Christ and that with the faithful have four steps, they are: (1) Identification with Christ in an enhancing union which is based on real and profound discipleship of Christ rather than any form of compromising union with Christ in the form of half-hearted dedication (*Dem X,5*). (2) The enhancing union with Christ would effect the imprinting of the Son in the pastor/priest (*Dem X,6*). (3) Imprinting of the Son functions as the key of stewardship of Christ (*Dem X,8*). (4) Enhancing union and imprinting of the Son generate the true stewards who attain the power and possession of the treasury of Christ from which they can provide for the sheep in the name of Christ (*in persona Christi*). Whatever is given out in the name of Christ will not make the giver impoverished, because what is given is the ‘power and wisdom of God’. Even if it is divided among many no diminishing happens, but multiplications occur (Mt 11:27; 1Cor 1:24; *Dem X,8*). Only by attaining these stages can one be a shepherd/minister, builder and steward of Christ and in fact a true Christian priest. The functions of priestly services are described by Aphrahat:

O you pastors, you should be like this diligent pastor, the head of the whole flock, who cares so much for his flock: He brought near the distant ones, brought back the strayed, visited the sick, strengthened the weak, bound up the broken and kept the fatlings (Ezk 34:2-4). He handed himself over for the sake of the sheep. He chose and taught the brilliant pastors and delivered the sheep into their hands and gave them power over all his flock (*Dem X,4*).<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

The nature of priestly ministry is defined, governed and exercised by the economy of the history of salvation. Christ, the Good Shepherd, who gave himself for the sheep is the Supreme Pastor who ‘hovers over’ all pastors and the whole history of salvation. Christ, the Good shepherd, beyond definition and description, became incarnate before humanity the true pastor. Hence, the economy of the Good Shepherd

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37 Tr. K. Valavanolickal, *Aphrahat Demonstrations I*, (*Moran Etho 23*), 220.

is the economy of the pastoral life and service. Pastors have to keep that economy uncorrupt and undeviated with due diligence and dedication leading to fuller realization. Christ should be presented as the door of the sheep and nobody else. The realization of the economy of Christ is the goal of Christian pastoral service.

Dealing with Christian mysteries through imageries, especially those that are derived from the deeper cultural traditions of different peoples, serve as an inspiration and a paradigm for contextual theologizing and inculturation. Based on the social changes and cultural adaptations from time to time it is necessary to search for new imageries as well.

Syriac vision of the nature and economy of priesthood is thoroughly biblical, concretely anthropological and participative in nature. By insisting on the participative nature of priesthood, Syriac vision underlines the mystery aspect and the sacramental nature of the priesthood, both for the orders of the royal/common priesthood and the ordained/ministerial priesthood. The primary concern is not the rank, order of power and services, but the manner in which one realizes and fulfills one's own priesthood. The subjective levels of participation from one's own order of priesthood remain more important than the external, objective levels of hierarchical power and services. This type of sacramental and mystical understanding and acceptance of the nature and functioning of priesthood can remove many disputes emerging from the acrimonious juridical, hierarchical and social issues that are in a way secondary to the true nature of participation in the 'spirit of priesthood'.

The spirit-guided functioning of the 'spirit of priesthood' in the world for purification, reconciliation, integration and perfection, is seen as a pattern through out the history of salvation. It will be the same pattern, but in appropriate versions, according to the demographical and social changes, that will be followed in the on-going history of salvation as well.

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# **Darsan (Vision) and Tapas (Mission) of a Priest**

Jose Nandhikkara

In this Year for Priests, a *darsan* (vision) into the *tapas* (mission) of Kuriakose Elias is presented here as a model for the *darsan* and *tapas* of a priest. He was a versatile genius who singularly devoted to fulfil God's will in all circumstances and championed pioneering efforts in religious, ecclesial, liturgical, pastoral, spiritual, social, financial, educational, cultural, and administrative fields. The four terms that he had used to refer to the religious communities that he nurtured are interpreted here as symbols of his vision and mission and that of a priest today in the church and in the society: *Besrauma* (house on hilltop), *darsana veedu* (vision house), *tapas bhavan* (mission house) and *punya sanketam* (abode of holiness).]

## **1. Introduction**

The Servant of God Bishop Mathew Kavukatt wrote in 1959: "The life of Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara, a monk of extraordinary sanctity, a man of dynamic personality with broad vision and powerful push and unabating pluck ever remains with broad vision and powerful inspiration to all those who take care to look at it."<sup>1</sup> A *darsan* (vision) into the *tapas* (mission) of Kuriakose Elias is presented here as a

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<sup>1</sup> Chacko K.C. *Father Kuriakose Elias Chavara*, Mannanam 1959, foreword, i-ii.

model for the *darsan* and *tapas* of a priest.<sup>2</sup> In this Year for Priests, Blessed Kuriakose Elias is a model for all priests, giving all of us especially the priests a *darsan* and *tapas*. He was a versatile genius who singularly devoted to fulfil God's will in all circumstances and championed pioneering efforts in religious, ecclesial, liturgical, pastoral, spiritual, social, financial, educational, cultural, and administrative fields. He was instrumental in the renewal of the church and society at the time through his various apostolic activities such as foundation of religious congregations for men and women, seminaries for the education and formation of clergy, liturgical renewal, introduction of annual retreats for priests and faithful, a printing press and a publishing house for the propagation of catholic doctrine and good books, schools for general education, promotion of Christian families, a house for the dying and destitute, etc. He was also a profound scholar, an educationist, a historian, a poet and a social reformer; above all he was a sage and saint. As Pope John Paul II observed in the beatification homily, "His success ... in all his many undertakings, was undoubtedly due to the intense charity and prayer which characterised his daily life, his close communion with Christ and his love of the church as the visible Body of Christ on earth."<sup>3</sup>

Blessed Chavara used four terms referring to the religious communities that he had nurtured: *Besrauma* (house on hilltop), *darsana veedu* (vision house), *tapas bhavan* (mission house) and *punya sanketam* (abode of holiness). These present, I argue, a four-fold ideal of a priest in the church today. Blessed Kuriakose Elias himself realized these ideals in his life and ministry; his *darsan* and *tapas* witness to these noble ideals and he was the personification of these ideals. This *darsan* and *tapas* is also in harmony with the magisterial teachings on the priesthood in the Catholic Church. There is no topic that drew as much attention as priesthood in the magisterial

2 The word *darsan* is derived from the root *dr*, meaning to see; *darsan* refers to vision, insight and philosophy. *Tapas* is derived from the root *tapa*, meaning heat; *tapas* is that which generates heat. In the Indian religious scenario it refers to the prayer and penance by the sages. *Tapas*, here, refers to the passionate commitment and concerted action – the mission of a person.

3 Kalluveettil Paul and Kocahapilly Paulachan, eds. *The Lord of Heaven & Earth: Chavara Studies in Honour of Fr Lucas Vithuvattickal*, CMI, Bangalore: Dharmaram publications, 2004, 82.

documents of the church in the last fifty years. There are at least 15 documents, beginning with *Sacerdotis Nostri Primordia*, Encyclical of Pope John XXIII, proclaimed on the occasion of the centenary of the death of St John Maria Vianney, and concluding with the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI, *Year for Priests*, proclaiming the year for priests on the 150th anniversary of the death of St John Maria Vianney. They speak about the *darsan* and *tapas*, life and ministry of priest.

The magisterial documents present presbyterate in terms of a share in Christ's threefold office of prophet, priest and pastor. They all interweave together to give the vision and mission of a priest. As a human being he is a priest of the cosmos, as a Christian he is a priest of all humanity, as a presbyter he is a priest of the baptized, as a collaborator to the bishop he shares in the ministry of Christ as prophet, priest and pastor. The challenge is to live this *darsan* with *tapas* and a *tapas* with *darsan*. A *darsan* without *tapas* is lame and a *tapas* without *darsan* is blind. Blessed Chavara was blessed with the divine vision (*darsan*) that animated his thoughts, activated his words and empowered his actions; realizing that *darsan* was his lifelong *tapas*.

## **2. Besrauma – House on Hilltop**

Blessed Kuriakose Elias and the founding fathers of the first indigenous religious congregation, called today *Carmelites of Mary Immaculate* (CMI), referred to the mother house at Mannanam – *Besrauma*, house on hilltop. It was like a city built on a hill and a lamp lit and placed on a lamp-stand (Mt 5.14-16). In choosing a hilltop for the first monastery and calling it *besrauma*, I suggest, we could find the inner meaning and dynamism of a priest: rooted in God and oriented to the people. Blessed Chavara writes about Mount Tabor, Mount Calvary and Mount Zion, where we find dynamic encounters of God and human beings. The top of a hill is considered as the abode of God and *besrauma* like a city built on a hill was visible and approachable to the people; yet it was away from the hurly and burly of a life in the world. Founding fathers spent a lot of time to find a suitable place for the foundation of the mother house. Later looking for a place for a monastery at Changanacherry, he wrote to the parish priest there, detailing the ideals that directed them in selecting the first place for the monastery: "The place should be sufficiently distant from the market place so that the noise of the market may not disturb life in the monastery."

There should be good water. There should be a river close by so that we can conveniently reach the place by boat. The place should be sufficiently large with big trees round to moderate the heat. Besides the space for the construction of the monastery, there should be place also for gardens as well.”<sup>4</sup> Blessed Chavara himself was a *besrauma*, a man of God, accepted and respected by the people and who led people from the front. I suggest we use this as a metaphor for priest. A priest is a *besrauma* – a house built on a hilltop. Though he lives in the world, he is not of the world; yet he is readily available for the people. Like a house that gives protection to the people who live in it and a light house that guides people in their journey, a priest welcomes the people and provides them guidance and protection in the name of Christ the Lord and in the name of the mother church.

It is suggestive that the New Testament used secular and functional terms *episcopos* (overseers), *presbyteros* (elders) and *diakonos* (ministers/servants) and not the sacral terms such as *hierus*, *sacerdos*, and *pontifex* to refer to her leaders, including priests. In the magisterial documents the term *sacerdos* – priest is used both for *episcopos* and *presbyteros*. According to the magisterial documents, the presbyters have a double dimension: they function in persona Christi and in the name of Church: it is divine and human. They are ordained by sacramental anointing and appointed by the bishop for ministry in the Church. A presbyter may be described as a Christian consecrated by anointing of the Holy Spirit and configured to Christ the priest, to fulfil Father’s mission of salvation of all, and deputed by the Episcopos to the service of God’s people as a minister of the Church. His role is that of a *besrauma*, to guide the people with a *darsan* and to work toward realising the *darsan* with *tapas*, with undivided attention to the Lord and passionate commitment to the people.

A presbyter is a human being living a life rooted in nature, extended to community and oriented to God. Human beings, like a tree, have the roots in the earth; branches, flowers and fruits extend to the world, and grow toward the heavens. Human beings are also priests of the cosmos; they are the only beings capable of offering praise and worship to God on behalf of the entire universe, knowingly and willingly. A

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4 Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol IV, Mannanam: The Committee for the Cause of Bl. Chavara, 1990, 90.

presbyter is a Christian and every Christian is a priest: they offer praise and worship to God on behalf of all human beings. Second Vatican Council revived the notion of common priesthood of the baptized, which was dormant since the middle ages. All the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ: prophetic – in the ministry of Word; cultic – to offer prayer, sacrifice and worship, and pastoral – to serve in the world. The church is ‘a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people’ (1Pet 2.9-10). The presbyters also share in the common priesthood; therefore they are brothers to fellow Christians. Since they are ordained to care for the baptized, they have also authority, that of teachers and fathers. Both as a man and as a Christian, a priest needs to be a *besrauma*: a shelter for the people, dedicated to God. A priest is in the world, with the people, with the *darsan* and *tapas* to transform the world into the Kingdom of God, Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit.

### **3. Darsana Veedu: Vision House**

Blessed Chavara called the *besrauma* also *darsana veedu* – vision house. He wanted the Mannanam community to be a house of vision, for themselves and for the church in India. He had a vision for himself, for the congregation, for the church and for the society and they were inseparably intermingled to bring forth a life vision *jeevithadarsan* and a world vision, *visvadarsan*. He was a man of vision and he generated vision for the generations to come. It was a vision of a contemplative in action and an activist in contemplation. Pope John Paul II succinctly described the *darsan* of Blessed Kuriakose, in the beatification homily: “Essentially a man of prayer and intense charity, he stayed in close communion with the Lord amidst his several religious and social activities permeating his spirituality to all around him, so much so that he was accepted and revered.”<sup>5</sup> The CMI constitution testifies to the life of the first community led by Bl. Chavara: “Their fervent, recollected prayer life which activated their apostolate and the apostolate which enriched their prayer life.”<sup>6</sup> CMI, CMC congregations, Church in Kerala and India, and the society at large owe much to this great man of vision.

5 Kalluveettip Paul and Kocahapilly Paulachan, eds., *The Lord of Heaven & Earth*, 83.

6 CMI Constitution, 4.

His *darsan* was guided by the biblical ideal: ‘The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup’ (Psalm 16.5), which he took upon himself as his motto when he joined the seminary at a tender age. The testimonies describe blessed Chavara as a man of God, a man adorned with divine grace, a man of divine vision, a man full of the Holy Spirit, etc. because he lived in the presence of God, and sought union with Him through the fulfilment of His will. God’s will, that will be and that must be – was his guiding life principle. His *tapas* was to realize God’s will in him, in the church and in the society. He used to say, “This work is not ours, but the patrimony of Jesus Christ. It is enough if we work.”<sup>7</sup> In a letter to his nephew Fr Joseph Chavara, he wrote: “Also if God so wishes, he can achieve through me glory which is beyond my capacity. ... He will surely help you to look up courageously and never to be disheartened, even when you feel that you do not have sufficient strength, because ‘everything is possible to me in Him who strengthens me’. In these words let us hope for our strength and make the decision for yourself.”<sup>8</sup> He was convinced of God’s power and guidance in all his endeavours: “Beloved brethren, this humble congregation of ours is not man-made. You are witness to the truth that God has nurtured it with genuine care and helped it to grow.”<sup>9</sup> It is with the same passion for fulfilling God’s will that he wrote: “The time that remains for me I will use for his glory only, that I will live up to my vocation and so I oblige my conscience. Don’t say that it is difficult or impossible for you. He will give you strength to your body and he himself will enlighten your mind and intellect. He will give you both, I am sure.”<sup>10</sup>

A religious house, *darsana veedu*, in the *darsan* of Father Kuriakose Elias was not just an enclosure, circumscribed within the four walls of the monastery, but a vision generating house for the church and society, for the people and for their salvation. It has to become *tapassu bhavan* (mission house) where prayer and action meet and merge. He knew the importance of *tapas* for attaining *darsan*. In the words of R. Venkataraman, former president of India, “Few people have been able to combine the contemplation of God with the service of man as

7 *Positio*, 341.

8 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol IV, 54.

9 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol IV, 61.

10 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol IV, 54.

naturally and creatively as father Chavara did. There was in fact no dichotomy in his mind between the world of faith and the world of action. Chavara represented both. A mystic, he could also be an engine of activity. Capable of withdrawing into his inner most being, Chavara was at the same time a motive force for the establishment a social order in which everyone could live in dignity and faith.”<sup>11</sup>

#### **4. *Tapassu Bhavan: Mission House***

*Darsana veedu* is to bring forth fruits and that needs concerted action, *tapas*. *Tapas* here does not primarily means penance and ascetical practices. It points to a way of life – committed and passionate to the Lord and His people. As it is written on the casket in which Bl. Kuriakose is buried, “Chavara’s life is an inspiring and edifying saga. From the day he was ordained priest, the Father dedicated himself wholly to God and worked piously for the social, cultural and educational uplift of his fellow men.” There is no field of apostolic activity that was not addressed by Bl. Chavara and many of them were pioneering efforts in the Indian Church. According to Pope John Paul II, “Seminaries for the education and formation of clergy, introduction of annual retreats for priests and faithful, a publishing house for the propagation of catholic doctrine, a house for the dying and destitute, special attention to catechumens, schools for general education were among the few of the apostolic activities under the able leadership of Fr Kuriakose Elias”<sup>12</sup>

According to the magisterial documents, a priest shares in the life and ministry of Christ in his threefold roles - prophet, priest and pastor. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Presbyters “are consecrated to preach the gospel, shepherd the faithful, and celebrate divine worship as true priests of the New Testament.”<sup>13</sup> Priesthood of Christ could be seen as the function of the head for the body the church. The *tapas* of Blessed Chavara gives us a model and inspiration for our mission today, as prophet, priest and pastor.

11 Kalluveettil Paul and Kocahapilly Paulachan, eds., *The Lord of Heaven & Earth*, 86.

12 Kalluveettil Paul and Kocahapilly Paulachan, eds.; *The Lord of Heaven & Earth*, 81.

13 *Lumen Gentium*, 28.

#### **4.1 Presbyter, a Prophet**

A prophet in the biblical tradition is primarily a spokesperson of God. The ministry of Word is the special domain of the prophetic role of a priest, according to the II Vatican Council documents: “it is the first task of the priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the gospel of God to all ... Priests ... owe it everybody to share with them the truth of the gospel in which they rejoice in the Lord.”<sup>14</sup> Bl. Chavara was convinced of the fact that an uneducated priest is not only inefficient to do anything worthwhile in his pastoral work, but might even be detrimental to the salvation of souls. Therefore, after receiving tonsure, he devoted himself all the more earnestly to his studies so that he might become a knowledgeable minister of God. In his view, Word of God is the food and drink of a priest. The bishop of the time wrote to Rome, recommending him to be made a bishop that he was enchanting at the pulpit. In those days, the practice of preaching of homily during Liturgy was not in practice. Bl. Kuriakose and his conferrers introduced this practice in the churches by giving proper importance to the Word of God. By his homilies and counselling on Sundays and feast days everywhere people were moved to shed spiritual blindness and to embrace divine enlightenment. It was as if Vatican II was paraphrasing this holy father’s conviction when it declared, “The people of God is formed into one in the first place by the word of the living God, which is quite rightly sought from the mouth of the priests.”<sup>15</sup>

Ministry of the Word, first of all, demands from the presbyters to listen, learn, live as witnesses and then to be preachers and teachers, by words and deeds, after the model of Jesus, the Prophet. The force and effectiveness of his words came from the divine union. Together with all Christians the presbyters are to live and proclaim the Word in the world and in the church; but the presbyters do it officially. It is given priority among the tasks of the ordained because unless the faith is proclaimed and received, none of the other activities of the church makes any sense. This is a Universal Mission: The spiritual gift that presbyters have received in ordination prepares them not for any narrow and limited mission, but for the most universal and all-embracing mission of salvation ‘to the ends of the earth’ for every priestly ministry

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14 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

15 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

shares in the universal scope of the mission that Christ entrusted to his apostles.<sup>16</sup> The ministry of the Word involves calling every person to the obedience of faith and leading believers to an ever greater familiarity with the mystery of God, revealed and communicated in Christ.<sup>17</sup> The presbyter is not proclaiming his own Gospel, but that of Christ and the Church. He shares in the prophetic authority of Christ and Church. Brother Rochy a member of CMI congregation, who was with Bl. Chavara while going from church to church preaching to the people noted in his diary: "Father Prior was preaching in the temporary *pandal* at the Puthenchira church in the morning. In the evening I found him in his room on his knees before the crucifix praying for a long time in tears."<sup>18</sup>

#### **4.2 Presbyter, a Priest**

By priest, we commonly understand someone who stand before God on behalf of the people and stand before the people on behalf of God. "Every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb 5.1). Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi, only the *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of Priesthood of Christ. However, the New Testament presents the death of Jesus on the cross to be a religious sacrifice. By shedding his blood he ratified the new covenant, both as priest and as victim. Church through her priestly ministry continues to celebrate his sacrifice and his work of worship and intercession. Blessed Chavara wrote on the dignity of a priest: "He comes down from heaven when the words of consecration is uttered by a duly ordained man, whether he be a simple priest or a bishop. He does not hesitate to be in their hands and on their tongues. Whenever they take him, he goes with them, and to whose tongue he is placed, he abides with him."<sup>20</sup>

The council of Trent defined priesthood in terms of the powers to forgive sins and to offer the holy sacrifice of the mass. Sacrament of priestly orders was instituted at the last supper when Jesus uttered the words, 'do this in commemoration of me'. Christ the Lord appointed

16 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 10.

17 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 26.

18 *Positio on the Life and Virtues of Chavara*, p. 541.

20 Complete Works of Bl. Chavara Vol III, 39. St John Vianney wrote: "O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die... God obeys him:

some of the faithful as ministers “who would have the sacred power of order within the company of the faithful, to offer sacrifice and forgive sins, and who would publicly discharge their sacerdotal function for the people in the name of Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Ministerial priest, acting in the Person of Christ, brings about the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers this to God in the name of the whole people. Pope John Paul II is emphatic: “the Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d'être* of the sacrament of the priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist and together with it ... The priest fulfils his principal mission and is manifested in all his fullness when he celebrates the Eucharist, ... This is the supreme sacrifice of the ‘kingly priesthood,’ ‘the source and summit of all Christian life’.”<sup>22</sup> However much importance we attach to other ministries, “the liturgy is the high point toward which the activity of the church is directed and, at the same time, the source from which all its power flows.”<sup>23</sup> Priestly ministry holds a pre-eminent and indispensable place in presbyter's life and ministry. According to the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, “It is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church.”<sup>24</sup>

Blessed Chavara's love for the Eucharist is seen in his efforts to reform the Syro-Malabar Liturgy. The Syro-Malabar church was governed by Latin bishops and the liturgy was Latinised, after the Synod of Diamper. Accepting the existing situation, he wrote and published the book of rubrics, *Thukasa* for the celebration of the liturgy. He wrote also the liturgical calendar in tune with the nine seasons of the liturgical cycle according to the ancient eastern tradition. He took great pains to translate the prayers and rituals for the Holy Week. He also compiled and abridged the book of divine office, in accordance with the eastern tradition, wrote out the whole book in three volumes in his own hand and submitted it to Rome for approbation. He also

he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host...” *Le curé d'Ars*, 97.

21 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

22 *Dominicae Cenae*, 2.

23 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

24 *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 22.

introduced the forty hours adoration in the churches for the spiritual growth of the people.

#### **4.3. Presbyter, a Pastor**

Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. Leaders in the Church are pastors, to serve and not to be served, after the model of Jesus, the chief shepherd. Shepherd is one with the flock, but has authority over the sheep. Authority is from God through sacramental ordination, not from the people through election and appointment. And this authority is for service. The functions of preaching, and worship, are expressions of the shepherd's love and care. "A good shepherd, a pastor after God's heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy."<sup>25</sup> The presbyter's role as a pastor is described in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* as a participation in Christ's function as head and pastor, exercised by him in the name of the Church.<sup>26</sup> The presbyter must help individuals to live according to the Gospel and to answer their particular vocations and form the community as kingdom of God, body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The pastoral commitment was, in fact the mandate the founding fathers had received when the Vicar Apostolic Mauritius Stabilini permitted them to start the religious life. He said to them: "If you, the one or two, who know something, go into solitude, who will be there to teach the people? If you so wish it, build a monastery, which will be useful for all."<sup>27</sup> The presbyters as pastors are not social directors, political leaders, or functionaries of a temporal power. The secular leadership roles are the proper field of action of the laity. The presbyter animates and supports the laity in the exercise of the common priesthood of the baptized, in transforming the world, and the secular leadership with Gospel values. In a circular letter Bl. Chavara gave concrete direction in realising this ideal of involvement with transcendence: "You are strictly forbidden to involve yourselves in the secular affairs of lay men, such as settling disputes among them, even those pertaining to

25 *Le curé d'Ars*, 101, quoted in *Year for Priests*, Letter of Pope Benedict XVI on 16 June 2009.

26 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6.

27 Kaniathara Jacob, *History of the Foundation of Mannama Monastery* (Mal), Mannanam, 1846, 6.

the parish, arising from financial transactions or claims. Your duty is to engage yourselves in helping the faithful in spiritual matters and not to intervening in the temporal affairs of lay people and later to introduce such topics into the conversation among the monks.”<sup>28</sup> Yet he worked for the uplift of the people tirelessly, even risking his life.

### **5. Punya Sanketam: Abode of Holiness**

*Besrauma*, house on the hill top, symbolizes the heights of spirituality which was its aim. In the *darsan* and *tapas* of Blessed Chavara, religious houses are *punya sanketam*. If one could bring into focus Blessed Chavara’s vision and mission, it is to generate saints in the church. He was pained by the fact that there are no saints in the Indian church then, though India was singularly blessed to receive faith from the Apostle Thomas in the first century itself. He called the church barren, because there are no saints. He wanted to become a saint and help others, men and women, to become saints.

In the circular that he wrote jointly with the provincial delegate Fr Leopold, we read: “These monasteries are founded by God and willed by him to be mirrors of virtues and assembly of holy people, not associations of self-willed stewards and business administrators. The strength of the monastery does not consist in the thickness of its walls, but in the virtue and religious zeal of the monks who dwell in them.”<sup>29</sup> Vatican II speaks of the universal call to holiness. This call to holiness, addressed to all Christians has a special urgency to the presbyters, who represent Jesus the sinless one. Keeping his eyes fixed on Christ, the presbyter says with Paul, ‘Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ’ (1 Cor 11.1).

Priestly holiness is both a gift and task. A presbyter is called to personal holiness as a consequence of his priestly consecration. The grace given to him in the sacrament of order is part of his special configuration to Christ the priest, because it is the grace which makes him a living instrument of Christ. The presbyter must abide in Christ, so that Christ may abide in him and enable him to bear fruit, for apart from him the disciple can do nothing.<sup>30</sup> Holiness is vitally necessary to

28 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol IV, 68.

29 *Complete Works of Bl. Chavara*, Vol IV, 65.

30 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 36.

the fruitful exercise of his office and service; to preach, worship and care for the people. The threefold presbyteral office not only requires holiness but also fosters it: Familiarity with the word of God in the prophetic office; identification with Christ as priest and victim in the Eucharist, and union with Christ's love through the pastoral ministry. Blessed Chavara admonished the priests to sanctify the world by their prayers and the holy sacrifices at the altar. "You, as a consecrated priest and a minister of God, responsible for the care of souls, should by your private and official prayers and by the Holy sacrifice at the altar, check the wrath of God and, as it is your duty, to pray to the Almighty for sinners, to stop his displeasure towards them."<sup>31</sup> The fruitful reception of the sacrament of penance, daily examination of conscience, devotion to Mary, visiting Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, retreats and spiritual direction are some of the suggested helps toward fostering the interior life of priests. In the biography written by Fr Beccaro, we are told that 'of reason of his great veneration and faith in the blessed sacrament, offered the mass with great zeal, devotion and recollection to the great edification of all those who were present. Beside the visits to the blessed sacrament, prescribed in the constitution, the servant of god used to spend long hours in meditation, on his knees, before the blessed sacrament.'<sup>32</sup> What he had written as a piece of advice to the sisters he practiced in his life faithfully: "Dwell in the love of Jesus Christ. Rest before his eyes. Walk beside him. With him converse always. When you have attachment or desire or pleasure over anything, this Beloved Lord turns to you and tells you: "Look at me. Will this object give you greater enjoyment than what I give?"<sup>33</sup> This is also the way Bl. Chavara would give to all the priests who are called to dwell in the *punya sanketam* and to become *punya sanketam*.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, let me bring a symbol from the Upanishads which is also used in the Gita, that of *Urdwamulorwak sakha asvatha*, a very special tree: "Its root is above, its branches below – This eternal fig-tree! That (root) indeed is the Pure. That is Brahma. That indeed is

31 Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol III, 60.

32 *Positio*, 493.

33 Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol IV, 82.

called the Immortal. On it all the worlds do rest, and no one ever goes beyond it. This, verily, is That" (Katha Upani<sup>o</sup>ad VI.1). Jesus Christ has his roots in the divinity of His Father, and he declares, "I am from above" (Jn. 8:23). Though rooted in the divine the Son of God descended downwards to the world, took the human nature, and embraced the whole of history, human and cosmic, in his humanity (Phil 2:5-11). Blessed Chavara was such a special tree, with roots in the divine milieu and extending the ministry of the church to the whole of humanity and to the cosmos. In him the human is transformed by the divine, and the divine operates through the human. And as such this tree serves as a symbol and ideal for every priest. Priests' roots are in God and branches grow toward the people bringing divine fruits to the people. Rooted in nature one could give only natural fruits. Priest is called and appointed to bring forth divine fruits. Blessed Chavara wrote on the first page of the chronicle of the mother house about starting a religious life in the Indian Church: "Seeing that a lot of good has not been done in Kerala due to the absence of a *tapas bhavan* even for the priests, desired to start a *darsana* veedu at least for priests."<sup>34</sup> His ultimate motive was to generate saints in the church. *Besrauma* needs to be transformed into *punya sanketam* with *darsan* and *tapas*. I think a lot of good has not been done in the church today due to the absence of *darsan* and *tapas* among the priests. It is my wish and prayer "If only you know the gift of God" (Jn 4:10); both the gift and task of Priesthood; *darsan* and *tapas*, after the model of Bl. Kuriakose Elias Chavara. What gives a special character and unity to his *darsan* and *tapas* is the pastoral and mystical dimension permeating all. The *tapas* of Bl. Chavara on the one hand and his *darsan* on the other, clarify and interpret each other. To adapt what John Keats said of William Shakespeare: Chavara led a life of *tapas*, and his *darsan* is a commentary on it.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Complete Works of Bl. Chavara, Vol I, 1.

35 Poonoly Sebastian, *Writings of Chavara*, 115-126, in Kalluveettil Paul and Kochapilly Paulachan, eds., *The Lord of Heaven & Earth*, 125.